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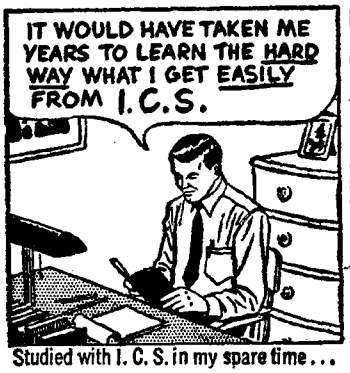

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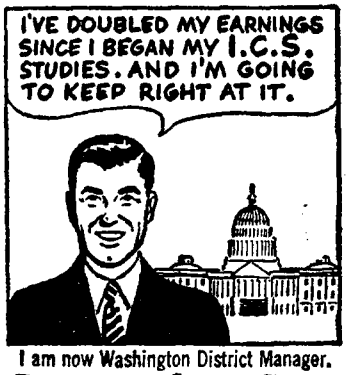

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Volume 12 April, 1951 Number 2

132 Pages ★ All Stories Brand New

COMPLETE FEATURE NOVEL

SPITE BRIDE ..... Doris Knight 8
Dulcie had never met Jason Keyes before, so she was dumbfounded when he said, "Yes, Miss Gilbert. I'll take your father's case. But I'm afraid my fee may be more than you'd care to pay. You see, I want to marry you!"

ROMANTIC NOVELETTES

THE PAST OF MARLA KING ..... Elaine Heyward 50
Steve's proposal had lifted her onto the pinnacle of happiness and sunk her into the mire of despair.....

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"After what happened last night," Mitch told Dru, "I'll never again believe you."

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Marie Antoinette Park, Editor

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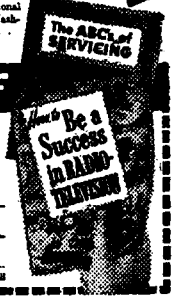

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She hated the feeling of being stared at, as though she were a piece of merchandise.

"Get Jason Keyes to defend your dad," they told her. "He's the best lawyer in town." But Dulcie Gilbert found that Jason was no stranger to the family and he was to demand an unusual and drastic payment for his services.

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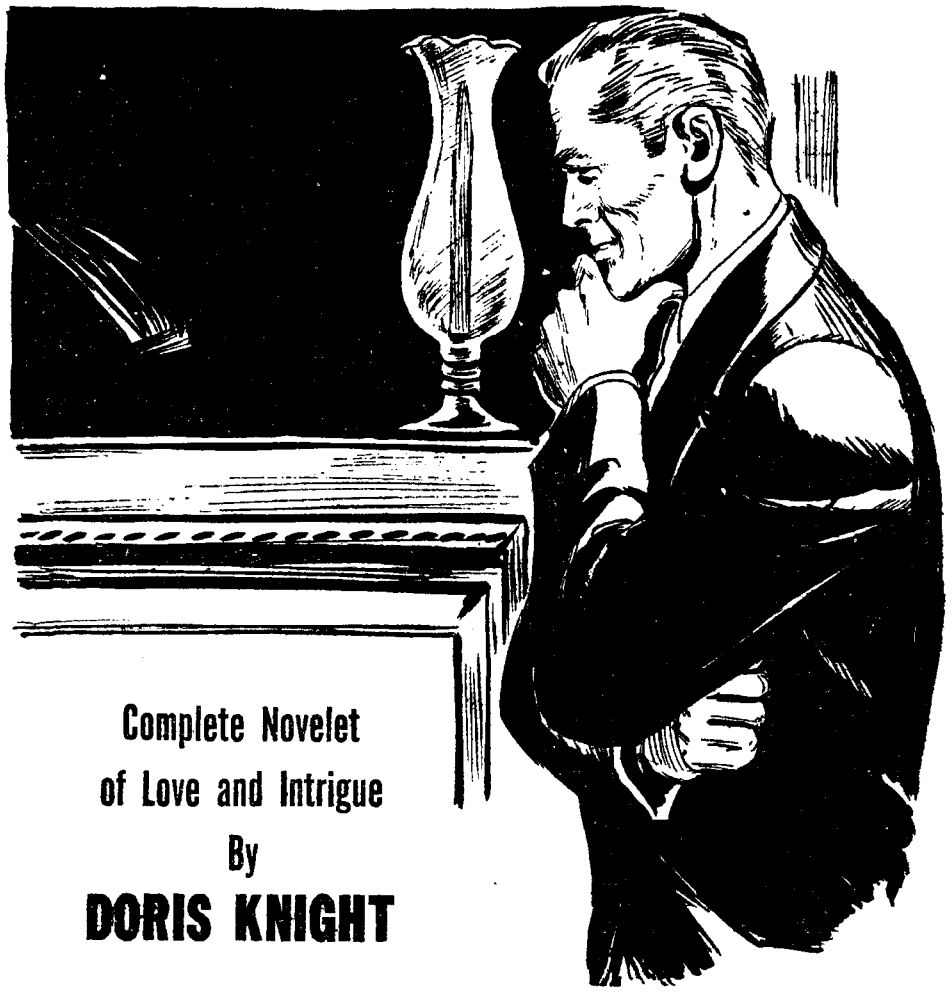

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By
DORIS KNIGHT

SPITE BRIDE

THERE wasn't one single, solitary thing to warn Dulcie Gilbert that this day was going to be different from any other. Nothing to tell her, that the end of her happy-go-lucky, carefree existence was at hand.

She was making grape jelly in the charming, sunshine kitchen which had windows overlooking San Francisco Bay. Her father loved grape jelly and this was to be a surprise for him.

She looked over at San Francisco and thought, "It's so beautifully clear today, you can see the houses clinging to the hills like beetles."

The idea of houses being beetles, made her smile. She thought, "Berkeley's a nice town to live in! It's fun to be part of a university town, and to have your father one of the most popular profs teaching there, and your stepmother one of the most attractive and beautiful women in the whole world!"

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Linna, her stepmother was gay and kind and terribly exciting. Her father had married Linna six years before, and the beautiful Linna had turned Dulcie's rather lonely, uninteresting life, into a magic dream of happiness.

When she heard the doorbell ring, Dulcie took a swift glance into the kitchen mirror to see if she looked as awful as she thought she did.

She did. No mistake about that.

There was a scarf tied about her red-brown hair; there was a frilly apron fastened about her slim middle, and both were bespattered with dark crimson spots that smelled fragrantly of crushed Isabella grapes. She had smears of grape on her tip-tilted nose and on her prettily curved lips where she'd tasted the bubbling jelly. Her fingertips looked as if she'd soaked them in indelible pencil lead.

Hastily, she washed her hands and cleaned off the grap smears on her face. The doorbell rang again, and she raced to the door and flung it wide. She gasped.

It was Tip! Of all the persons in the world, she hadn't expected to see Tipton McLean.

Tip was good-looking in a dark-eyed, tall, exciting sort of way. He was a Senior at U. C. and he'd been voted the most popular man in the class. He'd done awfully well at track and football, and he wasn't bad at his studies, either!

Everybody liked Tip. Everybody but Dulcie's father! It made things complicated for Dulcie, since she was secretly engaged to Tip. She tried her very best to sell him to her father, but it wasn't any use. So he never came to the house, instead, he and Dulcie met at the Sweete Shoppe, or at somebody's home, or in Linna's car.

Now, here he was, on the doorstep. And Dulcie looked like a fugitive from an indelible-ink shower!

As always, whenever she saw him, her heart began to thud and pound. He was so handsome! His face was lean and his cheekbones were high. His eyes were an odd, shining black shade that seem to have no centers. His hair was like a sleek black cap on his well-shaped head. He kept his hair brushed tight against his head, but sometimes when he was perturbed or excited, as he evidently was now, his hair developed a will of its own and fell over his eyes.

SOMETHING about the way he stood stiffly as if he'd had a blow, scared her.

She gasped, "Tip, what is it? Has—has something—happened?"

He said, his voice sounding odd, "Let's go inside, Dulcie. This is—rugged."

She backed into the comfortable, over-furnished front room, where Linna's frivolous taste, managed somehow to get along with Professor Gilbert's antiques.

She said again, "Oh, Tip, what is it? Tell me!" And forgot how repulsive she must look, all dappled with grape jelly. She remembered with one small part of her mind, that Tip once had said he had to have his women neat and smooth or they didn't rate any longer with him.

Tip seemed to have difficulty finding the words he wanted to say. "Your father...." he croaked at last.

She whispered huskily, "An accident! Is—is dad...?" Her voice disappeared too, and she couldn't find it again.

Tip put his arm round her. Which should have been comforting, but wasn't. Because Tip was shaking as if he had a bad chill. He said slowly, "Your—your dad... They took him to the police station, Dulcie. I guess they—arrested him."

That was so idiotic that she laughed. The sound was sharp and loud. "Dad—arrested. For what? Bringing in one of his precious antiques from Egypt against the Law?"

He stepped away from her abruptly, leaving her shoulders feeling bereft. He walked over to the mantelpiece and pounded his doubled fist against the wood as if the pain he inflicted on his own hand might help him endure some inner pain which was worse.

"They took your dad to Jail, Dulcie, because they think that he..."

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He came to a full stop. Dulcie felt as if disaster were swooping at her and that if she could run, she might escape it. But some awful Destiny held her chained to the spot and she was powerless to move.

She asked thinly, "Go on, Tip. Tell me everything."

Tip flung it at her almost angrily. "The police think your father killed —his wife... That he..." Again his voice trailed into silence.

Dulcie whispered, her voice thin-sounding and scared, "His wife? You mean—*Linna*...?"

He nodded. "Yes. That's it. They think he killed—*Linna!*"

She caught just those two words. "Linna—dead?" she repeated and terror came to envelop her from the toes of her small feet to the tendrils of hair piled on top of her head. It was difficult for her to take the few steps which brought her close to Tip, who was still pounding away at the mantel with his clenched fist. The Terror encroaching on her mind was like water edging in on sand at a beach, turning whiteness dark and damp and horrible.

He wiped his face and blew his nose after he felt her touch on his arm. He made her sit down and he sat on the arm of the chair. His arm trembled against her own.

He said slowly, "I found her, Dulcie! *I* found her! She was lying on the floor in your dad's study. He'd asked me to come to talk about—something. I went. The door was open. I stood there, looking in and I saw her. I'll never forget..." He stopped abruptly.

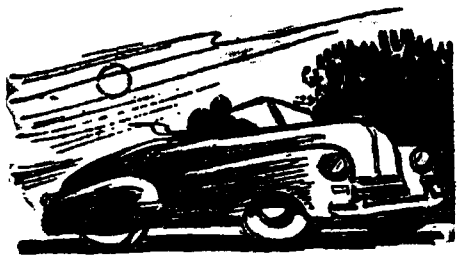
Dulcie could not take in the full enormity of the horror enveloping her. She whispered, "But why should they think that Dad...?" Still she couldn't realize this could be her father and her dear Linna they were discussing.

THEY both heard the faint whine of a police siren some distance away. Dulcie swayed slightly. He said, "I didn't tell the police, Dulcie. I—I guess I went crazy for a while. I went out of the building and I walked and walked. Trying to take it all in. Anyhow, when I came back, somebody else must have called the police. They were taking your dad with them. I hopped right into my car and came over here. I had to tell you first, darling."

Her mind, seizing on small, irrelevant things, the way minds have a way of doing when everything becomes too horrible to endure, thought, "It's the first time he's called me darling since he came. I need Tip now as I've never needed him before. And he seems to be a million miles away from me."

She pulled her mind back to what he was saying. "So don't tell the police when they come, that I've been here. I'm going to be dragged into this enough as it is..." He kissed her then. Kissed her in a desperate, yearning sort of way which seemed to need her terribly, and yet be equally sure he would not find the comfort he sought.

Dulcie didn't feel the kiss at all. She was in love with Tip. She was



secretly engaged to him. His kisses always had thrilled her. Yet, this kiss did not count at all. It was as if it never had happened.

The doorbell rang in the middle of the kiss.

Tip let her go on the moment. He whispered, "I left the car around the block. I'll sneak out the back way and go through that loose board in the fence. Don't tell the police I was here, Dulcie. Remember. Don't tell!" Then he was gone.

Incredibly, Tip dashed off, leaving her to face the ordeal of meeting the police alone.

She went to the door and opened it slowly, feeling utterly numbed and as if she were an actress in a play. Nothing was real.

Two men stood outside on the porch. Both were in plain clothes.

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One said he was Police Lt. Woods of the Homicide detail, the other was Sergeant Spruce. She thought their names were funny but she was afraid to laugh, for fear she could not stop.

She heard herself telling them to come in. Her voice sounded husky, but otherwise quite all right. She seemed to be acting a part in a play and uttering lines somebody else had written for her. The shock of what Tip had told her, had rendered her incapable of thinking logically.

She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the hall mirror. Except for the grape stains, she didn't look any different from usual. She was bewildered by the fact that utter chaos could strike, changing her whole world, and her face could look almost the same as usual. She clung to that idea, and would not think about anything else.

She thought, "I ought to say something. Express some surprise at police coming to the house."

The one named Woods said, "Is your mother at home, Miss Gilbert?"

THAT WAS fantastic. Tip just had told her that her stepmother was dead. Now this man was asking if Linna was at home? Just in time, she remembered that she wasn't supposed to know that anything had happened to Linna.

She said, a little catch in her throat, "If you mean my stepmother, Linna, no. She went out somewhere. I think to see some friends in Pleasant Valley."

They both looked, she thought, very sorry for her.

"Your stepmother, now... Did you get on all right with her?" put in the one called Spruce.

Dulcie said sharply, speaking the absolute truth, "I'm crazy about my stepmother! I can't remember my own mother. My aunt took care of me until six years ago when Dad married Linna. Then, everything got wonderful for me!"

She couldn't say anything more. She was fighting hysteria. Her heart was hurting so sharply she wondered if she were going to faint.

Lt. Woods had one more question to ask, "Sorry if this sounds sort of impertinent, Miss Gilbert. But your stepmother is rich, isn't she?"

Dulcie got panicky. How could she answer that? She decided it wasn't any use lying. "Yes. Linna was awfully wealthy, when she married Dad. We don't talk much about money at our house. I suppose Linna still *is* rich!"

The policeman sighed. He said slowly, "Afraid we have bad news for you, Miss Gilbert. Your stepmother is—dead. I'm sorry. This is a tough blow to take, I know. I—I'm sorry."

Dulcie began to cry. She had kept the tears back so long, that now they came in a flood. She sobbed out, "Was—was it an accident? Oh, poor, poor Daddy! This is going to break his heart."

Spruce put in curtly, "Afraid we've got another blow for you, Miss Gilbert. We've had to hold your father as a material witness."

Dulcie gasped, "Hold him?"

"If we can strengthen the evidence we now have, your father will be arrested on a charge of murder, Miss Gilbert. I'm sorry. You'd have to know the truth sooner or later." Lt. Woods sounded sorry for her. The word, MURDER echoed in the room like a dirge of hope, so far as Dulcie was concerned.

The telephone rang just then. Dulcie drew a couple of gasping breaths, and choked back her sobs and faltered out. "What—what shall I do? Can I—answer the phone?"

Again the policemen seemed to be sorry for her.

"You're not under arrest nor even suspicion," Lt. Woods told Dulcie curtly. "Go ahead and answer the phone."

Dulcie found it difficult to make her legs obey her mental commands. Her knees felt wobbly and her legs seemed to have lost their bones, but somehow or other she stumbled to the phone out in the hall and picked it up and said, "Hello," faintly.

It was Tip.

He spoke swiftly, "Is everything

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all right, Dulcie? You haven't told them anything about me?"

She said, "No," dully.

He went on, "They might trace this call. You'd better tell me the news as if I hadn't heard it. Because I want to come over and help you through this."

Suddenly she felt she didn't want him to come. She said, "No. Don't come over, Tip. Something awful has happened. Linna is—is dead. I—the police are here. I don't understand it at all. But I'm in terrible trouble. Something about Dad... Don't come over, Tip!"

He said, "Good girl, Dulcie! I love you, darling. Don't forget that. I love you a lot."

She faltered out, "I have to see a—a lawyer. Then I'll be back home. I can see you, then."

Tip said, "Get Jason Keyes! He's terrific. He's never lost a client."

SHE COULDN'T keep on talking with the police listening for all they were worth, in the next room. She said goodbye, and with Tip's, "I love you, darling," ringing in her ears, she went back to face the police again.

Lt. Woods asked, "What is this Tip's full name, Miss Gilbert?"

"Tipton McLean," she told him dully.

His eyes brightened on the moment. "Students who heard your father quarrelling with your stepmother in his study, just before she was struck down, heard Tipton McLean's name mentioned. Not once, but several times."

Dulcie's cheeks flushed. She said slowly, "My father doesn't like Tip very well. Linna tried to change his mind, for my sake. Tip and I are engaged."

She felt as if she'd pinned her heart on the clothesline for all the neighbors to see.

There was a singing in her ears, and everything in the room seemed to rush at her, suddenly, and then retreat, immeasurable distances. Lt. Woods said, "Better pack a bag with the things your father will need, Miss Gilbert."

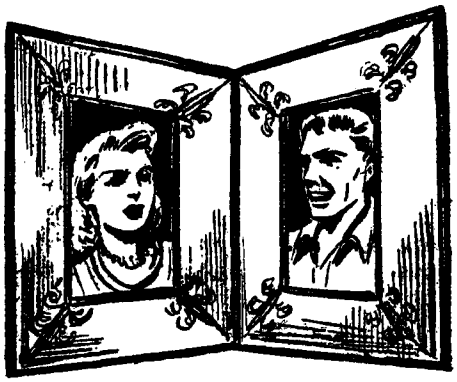
It was good to have something to do. Dulcie was more calm by the time she had finished the everyday task of packing a suitcase, with both policemen looking on, interestedly.

When Dulcie left the house with the policemen she was achingly conscious of neighbors peeking out of windows. She wondered if Tip's sister, Rita, five doors down the street, knew about the tragedy and was looking, too. Then she remembered that Rita probably was at the smart Campus Clothes Shop she ran so efficiently in the middle of town.

The trip to the police station was a merciful blank so far as Dulcie was concerned.

She saw her father only for a brief time that was very terrible and quite unforgettable.

Professor Gilbert seemed completely crushed. He said, "Dulcie, they think *I* killed Linna!"



Dulcie whispered, "I know you didn't, darling!"

He went on, as if he hadn't heard her, "That isn't the worst, Dulcie. Linna and I had a disagreement. Now, I'll never have a chance to tell her that I was sorry! We were discussing Tip McLean. Dulcie, she'd always been on Tip's side. Suddenly she didn't want you to have anything more to do with Tip! Just when she'd talked me into letting you be engaged to Tip officially, in the open. Instead of secretly behind my back."

Dulcie's face was crimson. "Daddy! You knew all the time?"

He said, "Of course," in an unemotional tone as if that was so trivial a thing that it didn't matter.

Abruptly he said, "Get me a good

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lawyer, Dulcie! I shouldn't be talking so freely to you like this. Everything I say, may be twisted and misconstrued! Get a lawyer. The best. Get—Oh, Jason Keyes, if you can. I think I remember having his brother in my classes a few years ago. Yes. Get Jason Keyes!"

Dulcie said, a sob in her throat, "I'll get him, darling. You can depend on that!"

Chapter Two

JASON KEYES' office was in an old-fashioned building in the middle of Oakland on a side street just off a teeming thoroughfare.

Dulcie found the place after asking directions of several people. She went up to the fourth floor in an ancient elevator run by a chatty old chap with shrewd blue eyes and a pleasant smile. He pointed out Jason Keyes' office down the hall, and she walked briskly toward them.

She discovered that her heart was beating very fast. She knew nothing at all about lawyers. She began phrasing her opening words over and over in her mind. She hoped the man wouldn't be too terrifying. He had a reputation for being absolutely ruthless and terribly clever.

She pushed open the door and came into a small, cluttered waiting room. A girl at a typewriter was batting keys swiftly. She was a pretty girl with cool gray eyes and a shining crown of brown braids wound round her head in an old-fashioned way. She said, "Yes?" with a rising inflection, without looking up from her work.

Dulcie faltered out, "I'd like to see Mr. Jason Keyes, please. I'm Dulcie Gilbert. My father has been—" Her mind groped for the word the police had used. Ah, yes. *Held*. That was it. But before she had time to use the word, the girl stopped typing and said,

"Oh, yes. Mr. Keyes got the news of Mrs. Gilbert's murder on the teletype. He's expecting you. Go right in."

This was so unexpected that Dulcie was startled.

She said, "Go in?" as if she'd never heard of such a thing.

The girl pointed to a door lettered, JASON KEYES. Then she went back to her typing, and it seemed to Dulcie that she pounded the keys with an extraordinary lot of vigor.

Timidly, Dulcie pushed open the door and entered Mr. Keyes' private office.

She was prepared to find it dusty and musty and old. Instead, his office was all done in cool green, with a mulberry carpet and drapes as the only note of contrast. There was only one discordant piece of furniture marring the beauty and perfection of the room. A horrible old oak desk, scarred and cracked and seemingly about to fall to pieces.

The desk startled Dulcie. And then she saw Jason Keyes and she got another surprise.

Jason was tall and blond and he had very blue eyes and they slanted downward at the outer corners a bit, in a predatory, hawklike fashion. His face was lean and his cheekbones were high. He was young and vital and crammed with personality.

He said, not getting up, "So *you* are Professor Gilbert's daughter, Dulcie!"

There was something oddly satisfied in the way he spoke. Something that frightened Dulcie and made chills cascade down her backbone. She blurted out, "My father's in awful trouble, Mr. Keyes. I—would you please act as his lawyer? He isn't guilty, you know. He was crazy about Linna! He wouldn't have hurt her for anything in the whole world."

He didn't seem to have heard her at all. He was staring at her in a rude way that was strangely disquieting.

Dulcie stumbled on, "I—we know you're Tops, Mr. Keyes. That's why we want you. We're prepared to pay your fee, no matter how high it is."

HE LEANED forward, across that antique desk that was so inharmonious and so ugly. Incredibly, Dulcie heard him say, "Yes, Miss

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Gilbert! I'll take your father's case! But I'm afraid my fee may be more than you'd care to pay. You see. *I want to marry you!*"

Dulcie hadn't realized that she was gripping her handbag with tense, nervous fingers.

Now, at his astounding words, she let her purse slip from her grasp, with things spilling out in every direction. She gasped, "What did you say!"

Jason Keyes' mobile mouth was unsmiling as he looked steadily at her. "I'm the sort of man who never forgets an injury, Miss Gilbert. I've waited a long time for this opportunity to get even with your father! You see, *your* father flunked my kid brother unfairly out of U. C. and it ruined his life. When my office got the news on the ticker that he was in a jam, I was glad! I knew it was my chance to get even!"

Dulcie, clutching the edge of the battered desk, to steady herself, felt the rough places left by cigarette burns, and thought vaguely, in the midst of whirling chaos, "This man needs a woman to look after him!"

It was a crazy thought to have at that moment.

She tried to be rational about the whole matter. "If my dad flunked your kid brother, it was because your brother deserved it," she said with spirit. "My father leans backward to be fair to his students. So your brother must have been a very poor student, indeed."

He didn't reply to her words at all. He ignored them.

"You're a very pretty girl," he said irrelevantly. He might have been commenting on a picture or a bit of statuary.

He got up, making his every movement deliberate and therefore vaguely frightening. He came over and stood close to her. She felt the force of his personality like a blow to the heart. Chaotic ideas chased each other through her mind. She thought, "He's dangerous as a coiled snake about to strike."

He said, taking his time about each sentence. "The only relative I've got in this world, is my kid brother. I had to do everything the hard way, myself. I sold newspapers on San Francisco street corners. I blacked shoes and waited on tables and washed dishes in beaneries. I wanted Rick's life to be different, so I sent him to U. C. in style."

He came to a full stop. Dulcie said confusedly, feeling as if she were groping about in a fog, "I still don't understand what this has to do with me." She wished he would stand a little further away, so the magnetism of his body wouldn't scorch her very heart.

He told her, "I'm getting to that," and it was a command to be still. She dug her fingers deeper into the worn places on the desk and fought against swaying as she stood there.

He went on, "Your father, Miss Gilbert, flunked my kid brother, unfairly, in History 2. That flunked him out of college. He took it so hard, he's been a drifter and a no-good ever since. So now, I'm going to get even with the man who caused all our misery. I'm going to save Professor Gilbert's life for a price. And that price is you."

Dulcie forced the words out of her dry throat. "But—why would—marrying me, even any score with my father?"

He laughed shortly. There was no amusement in the sound. "Because, my dear Miss Gilbert," he said brutally, "You'd be an unloved bride. You'd be a despised bride! I think that fact would bother your father."

HE LOOKED her over slowly from head to feet. Dulcie felt her face flushing in hot resentment. Yet at the same time, she found herself hoping that he found her attractive! She forced herself to say, in as spirited a tone as she could manage, "Stop staring at me as if I were a slave on the auction block!"

He went on looking. He said, "Expensively-furred dark red coat, covering an excellently curved figure!"

"Really!" exploded Dulcie, rage blotting out her fear of this unpredictable man.

He continued, "Slim, high-arched feet in expensive shoes. Sheer nylons

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on good legs...dark auburn hair. Yes. You'll make a nice ornament at the head of my dinnertable when we entertain. I like the way your white skin contrasts with the crimson on your lips. I'll like touching your skin till you tingle at my touch. I'll like walking away from you, then, while you...."

Dulcie gasped, "I'll pay you! *In money!* I never heard of anything so insulting in my whole life. I think you must be crazy! And if you weren't the best criminal lawyer on the West Coast, I'd slap your smug face and walk out of here."

She stopped. The memory of her bewildered beloved father in jail, returned to her mind and she felt faint and beaten.

He laughed again, brutally.

"Yes. How true that is, Miss Gilbert. I'm the famous unscrupulous Jason Keyes! I pull legal rabbits out of hats and get murderers off, scott-free! I'm the only man who can save your father from the gas-chamber. So you've got to stand there and take my insults! Too bad, isn't it, Miss High-and-Mighty Gilbert?"

"My father did not kill Linna!" Dulcie managed to whisper. "Stop talking as if dad is like the rest of the awful people you usually deal with."

He shrugged. "The police figure that your dad hit your step-mother with a bust of Socrates! They've got him in a jail-cell right now. So I wouldn't pull that sort of high-hat talk if I were you!"

Dulcie repeated defiantly, "He didn't kill Linna, I tell you! He was crazy about her. So was I. You've got this all wrong."

Jason yawned and said in a bored tone, "Your wool-gathering, absent-minded prof of a father, married a rich young widow, who ran around with the college set. She saw a lot of a young guy named Tipton McLean. She had full control of the purse strings."

"Tip wasn't Linna's boy-friend..." began Dulcie.

He paid no attention to her, but went on, "Your dad liked collecting antiques and living in a big house and giving you luxuries. So they had a fight in his office at the college, and students going by, heard this Tip McLean's name mentioned a couple of times."

Dulcie gasped, "Tip was my..."

"A little while after this fight, your dad is found at the Library with blood on his coat. Your step-mother, with her head bashed in, and blood all over the study, is..."

"Stop it!" screamed Dulcie, shaking as if she had malaria. Her eyes blurred with tears. Sobs tore violently at her throat. There was a ringing in her ears and everything seemed very far away.

SHE HEARD Jason Keyes saying, "My mistake. It wasn't the bust of Socrates that did the trick. It was Diogones. Wasn't he the guy that went around with a lantern, looking for an honest man?"

Dulcie thought, "I must not faint. I've got to fight for Dad. And for Linna's memory!"

She said faintly, "It wasn't Linna who was dating Tip McLean. He was *my* date! He lives just five houses away from us. He's always been as much at home at our house as he was in his own home."

"I'll bet," said Jason Keyes sarcastically.

Dulcie plowed along, finding the speaking of each word, a terrific task. "Dad didn't approve of Tip. Linna pretended to date Tip for my sake. Dad..."

Jason Keyes interrupted, "You're making everything just ducky for your father, Miss Gilbert! Now, you're telling me that the old fool killed his wife by mistake! But you're not taking away his motive for wishing her dead. Which was, that he wanted some luxury she wasn't prepared to give him."

Dulcie said weakly, "How much do you usually charge to—to get people off?" Her voice trailed into silence. She could not go on.

"It all depends on how much I can get," he snapped. "Five, ten thousand dollars, maybe."

Dulcie said contemptuously, "I'll pay you in *money*, then, Mr. Keyes."

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"Maybe you don't know it yet, Miss Snobbish Dulcie Gilbert, but, as of now, you're practically on the dole! You're broke. Because all the money stayed right in your stepmother's hands. And when she died, that tied up everything."

Dulcie quavered, "My father makes a good salary!"

He almost purred at her, "And does he love to spend money! On antiques. Stuff from Egypt. Museum pieces from the Far East. He's in debt about two thousand bucks right now."

Dulcie drew a long, shuddering breath. She felt as if she were walking about in the middle of a horrible nightmare. "Linna didn't have anybody to leave her money to!" she quavered. "Nobody but us."

"She left everything to your father," he told her curtly. "I made it my business to find out just how that Will of hers reads. She gave everything to your dad. Which means that if he's found guilty, the State of California gets it all. For under the Law no one who commits a crime may benefit by murdering anybody."

Dulcie felt as if a chill wind blew on her heart. She made one last attempt. "I could pay you double. After the estate is settled and when Dad gets free."

He laughed in her face. "Fat chance," he taunted her. He looked at his watch. "My time is valuable, Miss Gilbert. Accept my proposition. Or turn it down. Now."

She shivered. "I—I couldn't marry you! Not even if I wanted to! I'm engaged to Tip."

"All right," said Jason Keyes decidedly. "Then your father will be found guilty and put to death. Good day, Miss Gilbert."

Dulcie said faintly, "I—Please give me a moment to think this over."

HE LOOKED at her appraisingly. "Besides making a nice little ornament for my dinner table, you'll be insurance against other women trying to trick me into marriage by all sorts of underhand plots," he said, and he gave that annoying shrug of his, as if all women were a nuisance and he thus casually disposed of the whole lot of them. He added, "Women go for the brutal type, it seems."

Dulcie thought, "I must save Dad. This man is unscrupulous. I must be unscrupulous, too. I'll promise to marry him. But I won't do it. Nothing could make me marry a man I

despised as much as I do this horrible lawyer."

She said in a thin voice, which sounded quite unfamiliar to her, "If that's the only way I can save Dad's life, I'll—marry you."

He looked at her, his eyes seemingly piercing her very thoughts. He said crisply, "One moment, please."

He pressed a buzzer on his desk and waited. A voice came through the office communication system, sounding reedy and squeaky. "Yes, Mr. Keyes? Nora Morse speaking."

"Please come into my inner office. Bring one of those partnership agreement forms, Miss Morse." He

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clicked down the key, breaking the connection.

Dulcie thought, "It's time for this nightmare to be over! Oh, if only I could wake up!"

The typist from the outer office came in, a paper in her hand.

"Miss Dulcie Gilbert is going to marry me, Miss Morse."

Jason Keyes said in a casual tone. "Please type up a formal agreement to that effect, written in legal language. It's a purely business proposition. I'm getting her father off on a murder charge of which he, undoubtedly, is guilty. She is marrying me, by way of payment."

Miss Morse gasped audibly and looked at Dulcie, and then swiftly glanced away. She didn't say anything at all. She went out and a few minutes later the click-clack of the typewriter sounded in a furious manner.

Dulcie whispered, "Have you thought that this may—may backfire on *you*, Mr. Keyes?" He pretended to misunderstand.

"I'll get your father off all right, Miss Gilbert. But if I *should* fail, naturally, you wouldn't have to marry me! You'll hear that verdict with a divided mind. Now won't you? Either way, you'll lose! Quite a dilemma, Miss Gilbert!"

All this time, Dulcie had been afraid he was going to kiss her. Now, when he did, it was so totally unexpected that she could do nothing. Not even struggle against the brutality of his embrace.

His arms were like bands of iron crushing her to him. His mouth was hot and contemptuous on her own. But despite all this, a strange madness engulfed her. Each small nerve of her body became tinglingly alive. Her heart thudded and her mouth warmed and quivered as his kiss went on and on.

He let her go abruptly, when he had finished kissing her.

Dulcie wanted to scream out at him that she hated him. She wanted to beat against that hard chest of his with her doubled fists. Instead, she did nothing at all but stand there, hating herself for that hot, surging response to his kisses, and feeling utterly terrified and somehow, defeated.

Nora Morse brought in the typed document, and thrust it angrily in front of her. Dulcie saw that the girl's hand trembled, vaguely she wondered why.

"Read the partnership agreement, Miss Gilbert," she heard Jason say tauntingly.

She signed her name with a vicious jab of the pen which sent the point through the thick legal foolscap paper and made a splatter of blots.

The girl, Nora Morse went out, walking slowly as if she wanted to say something and didn't dare. Jason took the paper. He said, "You and I must have many conferences if we are to save your father, Miss Gilbert. We shall forget *this*." He tapped the paper he held. "There will be no further mention of marriage until your father is free."

Dulcie replied something unintelligible and stumbled out of the office like a sleep-walker.

As she came into the anteroom, she was aware vaguely that Nora Morse stopped typing and faced her

"It isn't fair!" Nora said in a low quivering voice. "You don't love him. Why don't you let somebody else have him who does love him?"

She went back to typing like mad again, before Dulcie could find words to reply.

As Dulcie went away she thought, "Nora Morse is in love with Jason Keyes. How could any woman be such a fool as to love that horrible man?"

But even as the question crossed her mind, her lips tingled with longing for more of those brutal kisses, and her body yearned to be held hurtfully close to him. So close that they two seemed like one person!

Chapter Three

Somehow or other, Dulcie reached the sidewalk. She walked blindly, not aware of anything but the utter chaos of her thoughts.

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The big clock on a nearby department store chimed five. The street was filled with people hurrying toward home.

Dulcie thought, with a sense of shock, "It's only three hours since my life crashed in pieces! Only three hours since I heard that Linna . . ."

She stopped her thoughts swiftly. That way lay absolute darkness. If she thought about Linna, she would begin to sob and scream. For her father's sake, she had to keep her thoughts in even channels, far away from gay, impetuous, happy Linna, with her merry laughter and the warmth of her generosity and the excitement of living deeply and fully.

It was just three hours since she had found out that her father was in jail, instead of teaching sedately at the big university that he loved so much.

She didn't want to go on thinking about Jason Keyes. But she knew she must.

"I've signed a paper stating that if Jason Keyes takes Dad's case, I've got to marry the man!"

She said that, over and over to herself to try to make it seem real. But it didn't seem real. It just seemed utterly fantastic.

She became aware gradually that she was as tired as if she'd done a big washing and then played eighteen holes of golf at the Palace Of Fine Arts course, and finished with dancing all night at a Prom.

She gazed with longing eyes at a taxi which was slowing provocatively as the driver looked at her with speculative eyes, scenting a possible fare. She shook her head firmly at the cab driver and he went on. If what that odious lawyer had said was true, Dulcie had no money!

She took a surreptitious peek into her purse. Twenty dollars. Five pennies. A quarter and a nickel! It was a horrifying thought that the money in the Gilbert home, which always had appeared like magic, had stemmed only from Linna, and that there literally was no more, till her father was declared innocent of this terrible suspicion of murder!

She thought frantically, "I know how to keep house and that's all. I'm not a bit smart. I don't even know how to type, like that Nora Morse in Jason Keyes' office!"

The big, yellow electric train which crossed the Bridge from San Francisco, halted briefly, practically in front of her. With a sigh of relief that her problem was solved thus simply for her, she wedged on to the section marked BERKELEY, thinking as she did so, that the cars resembled a jointed yellow caterpillar, without any head!

Of course, at that hour, the train was jammed.

Dulcie clung to a strap and tried not to look at the banner headlines, proclaiming on every front page of every newspaper that a college professor was involved in murder.

She couldn't help seeing that one newspaper had it, "PROFESSOR KILLS MATE AT U.C. JEALOUSY MOTIVE HINTED."

She swayed, feeling sick at heart.

She fought down rising waves of hysteria in which she yearned to tear the newspapers from the hands of those eager-eyed people who so avidly read details of what was to them, a sordid murder for gain and out of jealousy of a younger man!

She thought, "They mean Tip! My Tip. Because dad and Linna were fighting about Tip, he's all mixed up in this. He's smeared with pitch, too!"

SHE HAD been so thrilled when Tip had first dated her.

Dulcie had been a disappointment to her father in one respect. She hadn't cared to go to the university. She liked the campus. She loved the college life. But she had no desire to attend classes. She liked staying at home and playing housekeeper for Linna and her Dad. There had been a maid to keep the lovely home spotless, but it had been Dulcie who did the main amount of cooking meals and running the house.

So when the popular and much-sought-after Tip McLean sought Dulcie out and gave her the biggest rush in history, Dulcie's heart sang with excited happiness.

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Dulcie was the envy of every girl at U.C. She was sure of that. And Tip and she had the added spice of having the romance a secret one because of Professor Gilbert.

At least, they had *thought* they were fooling her father. But it seemed they hadn't been so smart after all. She wondered how he had found out that they were a flaming twosome around Berkeley?

She was so deep in her thoughts that she hadn't noticed that the train had jolted to a final stop. People were pushing past her to get out,

while she still clung to the strap, with her thoughts a million miles away.

She stumbled off the train with the others and walked through the familiar University gates. The Campanile bells were announcing melodiously that it was half-past five.

It soothed her to walk round the curved paths which fronted familiar buildings. Her one idea had been to walk across the campus and come out on the other side, where she could get a bus up the hill to her home. But as she toiled up the rise, walking past buildings old and vine-covered and dingy with age, and past shining new modern buildings, she had a sudden brainwave.

Why not go into the history building and walk up to her father's office and see if she couldn't discover something the police had missed? She knew that study so well! Her father hated to have the cleaning woman near his precious papers, so tidying up her dad's study had long been one of Dulcie's chores.

Questions were ding-donging at the portals of her mind, demanding to be heard. Questions she did not want to face. For instance, why hadn't Tip stayed with her, when the police were arriving? Why had he been so terrified of the police? Why hadn't he summoned the police immediately when he had discovered Linna's body? He had said it was because he had been so overcome by horror. Could that be true? Or had there been some other reason?

She shivered, feeling suddenly cold and frightened. Tip *couldn't* have been mixed up in Linna's death! But why had he acted so oddly?

She thought, driving herself to consider the full enormity of the Horror which engulfed her, "I've got to talk to Tip. I've got to ask him all these things. Or I'll begin to mistrust him. Tip—the man I love!"

Suddenly, out of the crowds of students walking along, one man darted out, seizing her by the arm and hurrying her back of the history building before she had a chance to protest.

"Tip!" she gasped. "Where's the fire?"

She was so glad to see him, her throat was all choked with sobs. Seeing Tip, put to flight all those doubts and horrid nightmare fears.

HE DREW a long breath and wiped his forehead with a crumpled handkerchief. "I got you just in time! There are news-hawks all over the place. The History building is alive with 'em! They're rarin' to go. I feel as if they'd gnawed my bones."

He was joking, but she saw that his face was gray with weariness and that there was a white line around his mouth, as if he kept his lips so

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tightly compressed that they were protesting.

Dulcie asked, her throat hurting, "Did the police question you, Tip?"

He regarded her bleakly. "Did they! They asked me the same questions over and over till I couldn't remember what had really happened!" He amended that statement. "At least what I told them had happened."

"What did happen, Tip?" asked Dulcie slowly.

She leaned toward him and he took her by the arm, his fingers lingering against her elbow. "Come on. Let's get off the Campus, darling," he urged. "You look as if you'd been run over by a furniture van."

She nodded. "That's exactly how I feel," she told him.

They walked along, their bodies touching and each deriving a measure of comfort from the contact. He said, breaking a long silence, "Your father was playing games with us, Dulcie. He didn't object to me at all. He *wanted* us to marry. But Old Simms in the Psychology Department, sold him a bill of goods, labeled, 'Opposition Strengthens Love!' He fell for that and pretended a down on me that he didn't actually feel."

Dulcie nodded. "Yes. He practically told me the same thing when I saw him at the..." Her throat closed up. She couldn't say the awful word.

Tip's fingers slid to her hand, engulfing her fingers in his, in a comforting fashion. Dulcie clung to him.

Tip asked her, "How was the interview with your Dad? Pretty rugged?"

She nodded. "He's sunk. Utterly sunk. I didn't stay long."

He prodded her, "Well, go on. What is it? Did you hear something about—me?"

She looked at him in swift surprise. "Oh, no, Tip. It wasn't anything to do with you. Only—well, something did—sort of happen."

She was having an awful time getting this out.

They came to the big gates. Tip said, "I've got the car parked over across the street."

Gladly, Dulcie postponed the telling of Jason Keyes' ultimatum. "How come you're over here at the Campus anyhow?" she asked. "I thought we were going to meet at the house."

Tip frowned. "Look, kid, your house is crawling with reporters, waiting to pounce on you. Rita has a friend at court. He's sort of cleaned them out of our place. But even so, once they even get a sniff of me, they're off in hot pursuit. When they see *you!*..."

"Oh," said Dulcie in a subdued voice.

"Besides," went on Tip, "I had to go to the police station for this questioning stuff."

There was another pause. "I suppose you're wondering about why I ducked out when the cops came?"

She tried to make it light. "A couple of questions did flit across my mind."

TIP HELPED her into the car. He paid particular attention to getting the engine started as he said, "I found something on the floor in the study, Dulcie. I can't tell you what it was. But it pointed to somebody...." His voice trailed off.

Dulcie cried, "You found something that might point suspicion toward somebody else, Tip! Somebody besides Dad—and yet you—covered for that person!"

"It wasn't covering exactly," said Tip uncomfortably. "I just picked up the—er—object, and—and I had it on me, when the police came to talk to you. So I had to duck out and get rid of it." He was stumbling badly.

Dulcie felt cold with fury. "Tip, I don't care *who* it was!" she stormed. "You've got to tell the police. You must! For my sake if not for Dad's."

He turned into a familiar side road and parked the car. He took her in his arms. She resisted him at first, then the warmth of his arms and the security she felt when she was held close to him, melted her anger. She clung close, her arms gripping him round the neck and her lips eager and waiting for his kiss.

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She felt his kiss this time. Felt it clear to her very toes. She gasped, "Tip, you don't know how awful everything is! I went to that lawyer and he wants..."

He didn't let her finish. He said, "We may not have much time, Dulcie. I've a hunch they're going to arrest me, too. I've got to tell you about it. You see, *I* had a big fight with Linna, too. Just before she went to your Dad's office. Matter of fact, I've an idea she went to your dad to talk about me."

Dulcie asked faintly, stirring in his arms, "But—why, Tip?"

He gave a sort of smothered groan. "Darling, I—Please try to understand! I sort of fell for Linna! Oh, I didn't realize it myself till this noon when I took her out to lunch. I drove her to Lover's Point and we parked and were talking about you. All at once, I—well I kissed her."

Dulcie fought down small eddying waves of jealousy. "You often kissed Linna," she reminded him. "Everybody did. She was the sort of woman everybody *wanted* to kiss!"

Tip said slowly, "This was a different kind of kiss, Dulcie. She got mad. I was sorry. I apologized. But she said maybe her husband was a better judge of character than she was. I—guess she was pretty mad, Dulcie."

Dulcie's mouth had stopped vibrating to the magic of Tip's kiss. Her pulses had slowed and she felt cold all over. She said, trying not to sound shrewish and fault finding, "I understand now, why you were scared when you found her dead."

He said, his voice sounding relieved, "Yes. That's it, Dulcie. I had to tell you. I couldn't go on, carrying that burden on my conscience."

Dulcie thought, "No. You had to make me unhappy, too!" She stifled the idea as disloyal. She tried not to care that Tip had found Linna irresistible.

All at once, she decided not to tell Tip just yet about Jason Keyes and his incredible proposition that she marry him. Time enough to tell Tip later. Perhaps she wouldn't have to tell him, ever. Perhaps, Jason Keyes had been getting his revenge on Professor Keyes for flunking out his brother, by terrifying the professor's daughter. Maybe it just had been a gigantic bluff! After all, the agreement couldn't be legal!

Tip kissed her lingeringly. Dulcie tried hard to cooperate in that kiss. With indifferent success. She wondered just *how* Tip had kissed Linna...to make her so angry!

Tip said huskily, when the kiss was over, "You're a wonderful little girl, Dulcie! I love you so much!"

Dulcie thought, "He does love me! I'm a fool to feel so sunk over this."

She asked slowly, "Better tell me everything, Tip. Was there anything else the police might find out?"

He shook his head. "That's the lot!" he said in a relieved tone.

EVIDENTLY he caught sight of the time recorded on the battered clock next to the gas-gauge. He said, "Gosh, Sis will be getting furious, Dulcie! She told me to be sure to bring you over to our house to spend the night. You're having dinner with us, of course," he added.

Dulcie murmured, "That's wonderful of Rita, darling, but..."

Her mind was torn by indecision. On one hand, she wanted to crawl away alone to rest and try to relax. On the other side of the picture, she didn't want to be alone to become a prey to terror and tears. If she was with people, she couldn't give way to her grief for Linna and her fear for her father's safety.

Tip said firmly, "You're coming to us, darling! No buts about that! I'll stop by your house first and you can pick up a few things and then we'll be all set."

There were lights on in Dulcie's house!

She gasped, "Look! Somebody's home!"

For just an instant, it seemed to Dulcie that none of the nightmare happenings had been real, and that she would go into the front room to find her father lounging comfortably in front of the fire with his feet in carpet slippers.

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Tip put that pretty vision to flight on the moment by saying stiffly, "It's the police, Dulcie. Sis went over to see what gave. They had a search warrant. And anyhow they've chased out the reporters!

"Oh," said Dulcie faintly, feeling sick at the thought of policemen pawing about amongst Linna's pretty underthings.

It took all of her willpower to go into the house. Tip stayed in the car, evidently motivated by his desire to avoid the police.

Lt. Wood was directing operations from the front room. With a sinking heart, Dulcie faced him. "I —I'd like to go to Rita McLean's house to spend the night," she said stiffly. "I'm not under arrest or anything, am I? It's all right to go there?"

The policeman looked at her steadily. "You're free as air, Miss Gilbert," he told her. "Go where you like. Do what you like."

"Thank you," Dulcie's tone was icy. "I'm going into my room to pack a small overnight bag."

As she threw things into the tiny suitcase, she was reminded of the bag she had packed for her father and sobs choked her throat.

Something made her look up. Lt. Wood was standing in the doorway tossing something from hand to hand, idly. She got the idea that he was doing the tossing act deliberately, to catch her attention. She looked at the object. The breath caught in her throat as she caught the gleam of blue-and-gold. It was a man's class ring. A senior class ring.

When he was sure she had seen the ring, he stopped tossing it from hand to hand and held it out to her. "Know who this belongs to?" he asked with deceptive nonchalance.

Dulcie shook her head warily, making no move to take the ring.

"It was sent round to the police station. One of those anonymous deals. It has a name inside. Bart Holmes. Now does that ring any bells?" The policeman was watching her narrowly.

SHE WAS so relieved that it wasn't Tip's ring, she answered readily. "Of course. That's Hobart Holmes, the football Coach. He was a U. C. fullback. He made history in his day. He lives in the end house down the street."

The policeman nodded. "Makes it all very cosy," he said, his voice sounding angry and sarcastic. "You and this Tipton McLean and his sister and now the Football Coach... all living on the very same street." He added, "Was *he* in love with Linna Gilbert too?"

Dulcie was so angry, that she spoke before she took time to think. "No! He's been in love with Rita McLean for eight years. But she's devoted herself to her brother, Tip!"

She stopped. Some warning bell told her not to add anything more. She went back to her packing, wishing her hands wouldn't shake so betrayingly.

The policeman said, "The note which came along with this ring, was printed. An anonymous contribution. I think I told you that, before. But the thing the note stressed, was that the ring had been found by somebody, quite near your stepmother's body. Somebody who took the ring and walked out without reporting the murder."

Dulcie was glad she had a dress to fold. She kept her face hidden from the sharp eyes of the policeman. She was thinking, "So *that* was what Tip found! Bart Holmes' class ring! He was covering for Bart, because he's Rita's boy friend!"

She wondered if Tip had sent the ring to the police. She decided not. Then who could have done it? She was almost certain that Tip didn't know the class ring had left his possession.

With her mind in a whirl, she finished her packing and snapped shut the catches on the suitcase. She was glad to get away from the keen eyes

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of the policeman. He did not offer to carry her suitcase out to the waiting car.

When Tip saw her coming, he jumped out and seized the suitcase. He heaved a big sigh. "You were practically forever," he told her. "I thought maybe they wouldn't let you come, or something."

She glanced at him from under her lashes as she murmured, "Tip, was it *Bart's ring* you found on the floor, near Linna?"

He stepped on the starter so hard that the engine protested and choked and died. He had to try again. By that time he had his emotions well under control. He said, driving off at top speed, which was his usual method of travel "Whatever gave you that insane idea, Dulcie?"

She said, "Somebody sent an anonymous letter to the police by Western Union messenger. The ring was inside."

Tip was silent for so long at a time that she looked at him, curiously. She'd never seen his face look so grim. He seemed to have grown up in those few seconds. He seemed to be facing something quite terrible.

But all he said, was, "Skip it, Dulcie. You're barking up the wrong tree. What I found, was something quite different."

She was almost certain that he was lying, but she let it go.

Especially as they were stopping in front of Tip's house.

Rita McLean always had been wonderful to Dulcie. Dulcie marveled at that, sometimes. Because it didn't seem in character. Rita was nine years older than Tip. When she was seventeen and Tip was nine, she had taken over his bringing up. Their parents had been killed in a plane crash, leaving the two McLeans alone in the world.

THAT SORT of a set-up usually led to an extremely possessive type of love, which certainly wouldn't welcome heart-interests for Tip. But Rita had gone out of her way to show Dulcie that she was delighted, that her brother had fallen in love with her.

Dulcie thought of that now, as she submitted to being kissed frostily on the cheek by Rita.

Rita McLean was one of the most beautiful women Dulcie ever had known. She was tall, and she had huge black eyes which were so dark, they seemed to have no centers at all. Her hair was black too, and her skin was startling white. She always seemed to Dulcie to be a symphony in black and white. With, of course, a dash of scarlet, which was her vivid, petulant mouth.

Rita said, in a soft, cooing voice which reminded Dulcie of doves chatting, "Darling, it's so good to have you with us. Tip will take your suitcase into the spare room. Dinner's almost ready."

Dulcie stammered out that it was awfully good of Rita to invite her to their house.

Rita smiled at her, charmingly. She said, "You and Tip are going to marry the minute Tip is graduated this year, darling. That makes you almost a relative. Now doesn't it. And what are relatives for, if not to rally round when there's trouble or sorrow."

Dulcie made suitable replies, but all the time her mind was busy as a squirrel in a revolving cage, thinking, "Rita and Linna were alike in that they both were beautiful women. But Linna was all warmth and charm and generosity. I can't help thinking that Rita is—cold. I can't get close to her. She's so wonderful to me and I want to love her, but somehow I can't."

There were the usual flurries of coats being removed and small talk and then Tip was back, presumably from putting Dulcie's suitcase in her room. He said briefly, "I'm going to run over to Bart's place for a couple of minutes, Rita."

He was edging toward the door as he spoke.

Rita seldom allowed her beautiful brows to wrinkle in a frown. Now she gave herself that luxury, as she snapped, "Nonsense, Tip! Dinner's ready. Everything will be spoiled! Run over to Bart's place, after we've had our food, if something's that important."

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Tip said stubbornly, "I have to go now, Rita. It's important all right."

He didn't allow Rita the last word, but went out, closing the door quite definitely, like a period, as he left.

Rita looked, Dulcie thought, quite white-faced with fury. But her self-control was excellent. She gave just the right, deprecating laugh as she shrugged and spread her beautiful fingers wide and cooed, "Men are such babies, aren't they? Tip sometimes seems exactly the same age as he was when our parents were killed in that awful plane wreck and I found out I was going to have to look after him."

Dulcie dared to say, "You've given up an awful lot for Tip, Rita. I'm sure he's grateful."

Rita whirled about, her eyes seeming even darker than usual. "Given up?" she repeated, and for her, the tone was almost harsh. "Oh, I see what you mean. Not marrying. My career as a model and now the dress shop that I manage to keep us both going. No. I don't count those things important. I've always known that some day Tip would pay me back."

She seemed to be talking to herself.

The doorbell rang just then and both women started nervously.

Rita gasped, "Who on earth can *that* be?"

Dulcie whispered, dismally, "Oh, I hope it isn't the police!"

IT WASN'T the police. But it was someone who struck terror to Dulcie's heart. It was Jason Keyes, looking as dangerous as a tiger about to spring, and as handsome as a Greek statue.

"Only with more clothes on!" ran on that small, irrepressible frivolous part of Dulcie's mind, which refused to be squelched, even by death and stark tragedy.

He said, in a matter-of-fact tone, "I'm Jason Keyes. I'm taking Professor Gilbert's case. I had questions to ask Dulcie, so I went to her home. Only to be directed here. I hope I'm not intruding."

He smiled at Rita, turning on all his charm.

All along, Dulcie had felt that Jason could turn his charm on or off, as he chose. Now, looking at Rita's devastating beauty, he definitely chose. And Dulcie saw Rita melt under the warmth of that smile.

She murmured, "Jason Keyes. Of course. The famous defense lawyer! How wonderful that you are going to defend Professor Gilbert! I'm sure now that he'll be acquitted."

"Lady, we thank you!" he said.

Rita went on, "Of course you must see how utterly fantastic it is, to think even for a moment, that a man like Professor Gilbert would harm anyone. Least of all, his beloved wife!"

For the first time, Jason looked in Dulcie's direction. He said, "I judge I'm talking to Dulcie's friend, Miss..."

Dulcie came to life with a start. She said, "Oh. I'm sorry. I'd forgotten you didn't know the McLeans. This is Rita McLean, who is Tip's only sister."

"I see," said Jason, turning around.

Dulcie braced herself. She expected him to tell Rita that he was engaged to Dulcie. But he didn't say anything of the sort. Instead, he made small talk and was very charming.

Rita served the dinner. Dulcie had been sure she couldn't eat anything at all. Somehow, she found herself consuming the food Rita had cooked. It always astounded people when they found out that this gorgeous, dashing beauty could cook like a dream. Jason followed the familiar pattern and complimented Rita extravagantly.

Rita thawed still further.

Dulcie thought, almost angrily, "She's falling hard for him!" She wondered why that made her so an-

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gry. She wondered where Tip was, and if he meant to come home at all.

Jason was finding out, by subtle questions, whether Rita was engaged or married. He seemed surprised to find out that she wasn't married or about to be.

He said slowly, "Beautiful women like you, have the chance to pick and choose. You are very young, of course."

Rita said, "I'm afraid I got so interested in bringing up my small brother that I forgot all about my own love-life! Tip is twenty-one, you know. Which makes me thirty! A really horrible age to still be a spinster, I suppose. But haven't I done a really splendid job on that brother of mine, Dulcie?"

Dulcie said glumly that she certainly had. She wondered how Rita was going to take the fact that Dulcie was engaged to somebody else. Dulcie always had the idea that Rita really had engineered the match between Dulcie and Tip. It was just an idea. She hadn't anything to back it up, really. But the idea refused to be squelched no matter how hard Dulcie tried.

JASON murmured, stirring the sugar in his coffee, "I don't know your brother, Miss McLean. Perhaps you'd tell me about him?"

Rita got a rapt look on her face. "He's frightfully good looking and awfully talented in so many lines! He's a splendid athlete, and he's a general favorite with everybody and he's training to go into the Diplomatic service."

Jason said in a doubtful tone, "I've always understood that a man has to have a private fortune in reserve, if he wants to go into the Diplomatic in a really big way."

Dulcie thought, "Jason talks like a guttersnipe sometimes. At other times, he sounds like a visiting diplomat, himself!"

Rita was saying, "I'm afraid we haven't very much money. I'm employed at a small, Campus clothes dress shop, as a manager. It took all the money our parents left us, to educate Tip."

Dulcie thought, "How funny. I've known Tip and Rita for years, and never found out as much about them as Jason Keyes has done, in just half an hour or so!"

Jason had gone back to complimenting Rita on her dinner. He suggested that she ring Tip at Bart's house. "I'd like to meet your brother," he finished casually.

Rita assented eagerly and went off to the study to telephone.

The minute she had gone, Jason faced Dulcie. His eyes were very bright. There was a strange alertness about him that frightened her. She thought, "He's so filled with vitality, he makes me tremble."

He said, speaking swiftly, "Don't tell Tip about us! Don't tell anybody! I've changed my mind. We're going to keep our engagement—if you want to call it that—a *complete* secret. From everybody! Understand?"

Dulcie said, rather sullenly, "Somebody else does know! THAT girl in your office. Nora Somebody." She knew perfectly well that her name was Morse, but somehow, she didn't want to say it.

Jason supplied the name for her in a matter-of-fact way. "Miss Morse? I'll take care of her. She never talks about anything."

"Why? Would you slit her throat if she did?" demanded Dulcie, not fighting against the antagonism which throbbed in the air between them, almost like a visible entity with a life of its own.

He looked at her, his glance direct and uninterested. "Stop trying so hard to be a Young Modern, registering nonchalance in the face of disaster," he told her disagreeably. "You don't have to work at the task of impressing me. I'm marrying you for revenge. Don't ever forget that fact."

Dulcie said, breathing fast, "Something will happen to save me from marrying you! I know it will. I'm in love. I'm engaged. I don't give one hoot about your brother who was such a spineless jellyfish he couldn't

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take his licking like a man, but got so sorry for himself he went all squshy!"

She thought, for a second, that he was going to hit her. "He's got a frightful temper!" she told herself, trying vainly to be superior about the fact.

He said, speaking very quietly, "Don't worry. I despise you more than you could ever despise me, Dulcie. But don't forget. Secrecy has become of paramount importance, if your father's life is to be saved. Our talk this afternoon must be kept strictly between you and me! Which means that you must not tell Tipton McLean!"

He added hastily, "You haven't told him already, have you?"

Dulcie shook her head.

"Sh! Rita is coming back!" he told her sharply.

Rita's step was light but he had caught the sound of her footfalls, no matter how soft. Dulcie thought, "He has ears like a cat!"

RITA was smiling pleasedly to herself. Her pale cheeks were flushed. "Tip stayed for dinner at Bart's house. He'll be over right away. He hopes you aren't angry, Dulcie. He got into some sort of fascinating discussion about sports with Bart. You know how men are!" Her laughter trilled out,.

"Tell me about this Bart Holmes," said Jason.

Rita darted a swift glance at him. Then she laughed again. "I suppose you want to find out if I'm in love with Bart, Mr. Keyes. Well, I really don't know the answer to that question myself. I suppose I am. At any rate, Bart is in love with me! There. Haven't I been simply delightfully frank?"

Jason looked at her coolly, "I wonder," he murmured.

Footsteps sounded noisily on the porch. The door opened. Tip and Bart came in.

This time, Dulcie's heart didn't do spiral loops when she saw Tip. She thought, "I've seen Tip too much lately, to get my usual thrill at meeting him. And maybe I'm the least bit sore at Tip for dashing off in this crazy fashion, and leaving me stranded high and dry with Rita."

Tip put his arm casually about Dulcie and hugged her. "Not mad because I stayed away so long, are you, Baby?" he asked her. "Things came up. I'll explain later."

Dulcie felt guilty! She simply couldn't understand it, but the fact remained. She felt guilty because Tip, whom she'd known practically forever had his arms around her. And Jason Keyes was looking on. Jason Keyes, who was an utter, hated stranger!

Chapter Four

SHE MANAGED to introduce Tip and Jason clumsily, and then to smile at Bart and say, "Hi," and murmur his name in turn to Jason.

Bart was one of those strong, stocky men of average height with a pleasingly rugged, ugly face, and a wonderful heart-warming smile. He had a keen brain and he loved sports above anything on earth. With one exception. That exception was Rita McLean.

Jason was taller than Bart, she noticed. And he was as tall as Tip. Somehow, she'd had the impression that Jason was inches under Tip's height.

Bart said clumsily to Dulcie, "I'm sorry about Liana. Everybody loved her, Dulcie. And we know that the professor had nothing to do

with—with... Well, he didn't do it!"

Dulcie's eyes misted with tears.

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"Thanks, Bart," she choked out, fighting sobs.

Jason looked at her with sardonic eyes. She thought, with a sense of shock, "The man is absolutely cynical! He doesn't believe in Dad's innocence. He thinks all of us are just bluffing! I'm glad Jason Keyes is a lawyer instead of being with the police!"

Jason said, "If I'm going to defend the man, I ought to have some background on Professor Gilbert. I think I'd rather have that background from a couple of people not quite so close, as his daughter and her fiance." He looked sharply at Tip. "You *are* in love with Dulcie Gilbert and expect to marry her. Isn't that the score?"

Tip colored and looked uncomfortable and said, "Yes. We're engaged."

Dulcie could have shaken Tip! Surely he could have seem happier about the fact! He'd spoken as if he faced a jail sentence!

Jason said almost impatiently, "Can't you take Dulcie somewhere, Tip? Go out in your car and neck—Only get out so I can discuss things with Miss Rita and Bart here."

It was extraordinary, but the fact remained. Dulcie felt her hand itch to slap Jason with all her might! She didn't know why she was so furious. The man hated her. He'd made that plenty plain. But to send her out to make love with another man when he had insisted he was going to marry her, himself... It was almost too much!

As she went out of the house, with her coat thrown over her shoulders and the sleeves dangling, she heard Jason say to Rita, "While we talk, I'm going to help you with the dishes, Miss Rita. I did a hitch of dishwashing when I was earning my education the hard way!"

Dulcie thought, "Snob! Always talking about his humble beginnings because he's so doggoned proud of coming up the hard way."

She was surprised to find she had spoken her thought aloud. Tip said, "Aren't you being sort of hard on the guy, Dulcie? He's tops in his job."

He added unexpectedly as he helped Dulcie into the car, "Sometimes I wish I'd had a chance to do a hitch at dishwashing or scrubbing floors to work my way through school. Sis fixed things so I went through on rubber tires. I don't know that it's such a good thing, actually."

He started the car and they drove off. Dulcie closed her eyes and relaxed. She murmured, "Did you ever hear about Ricky Keyes? He was Jason's younger brother."

Tip shook his head. "Before my time, I guess," he said uninterestedly. "Look, Dulcie, Bart said I could tell you. About the class ring, I mean. You did guess that I'd gone over to talk to Bart about it, didn't you?"

RELUCTANTLY, Dulcie came back from the warm cocoon of soothing rest the motion of the car and the brisk breeze against her face, was affording her. She returned to realities with a sigh of renunciation.

"Tell me about the class ring, Tip," she said slowly.

"Well, that's what sent me all off-base, really, when I saw Linna. I grabbed up the ring. I don't know what made me so sure it was Bart's. He's salt of the earth. I couldn't let such an incriminating thing *stay* there, could I?"

Dulcie sighed again, "I suppose not, Tip. Well?" she prompted when Tip didn't resume talking immediately.

Tip said, "Bart lost that ring, ages ago. So of course that lets him out completely." He sounded relieved.

Dulcie pointed out that the police might not think so. He refused to be bothered about that. "Bart's a wonderful guy. He and Sis would have been married long ago. If it hadn't been for me. I was right, square in the way!" He sounded aggrieved about that.

She asked slowly, "How did the ring get to the police, Tip?"

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He frowned. "That's what neither Bart nor I can figure. That's why we chewed the fat over that fact all during dinner and I didn't get back home. I put that ring in my briefcase under some notebooks. I can't think how it got out of there and landed in the hands of the police."

Tip stopped the car at their favorite parking spot. It was at the top of a hill and they could see across the Bay to the lights of San Francisco, which were so clear that could make out the slanting twin parallel lines of lights which marked Market Street from the Ferry to Twin Peaks.

Tip said huskily, "Everything looks prettier than ever tonight, Baby. And so do you look—pretty." He took her into his arms and held her close, and kissed her.

She felt that kiss, clear to her toes.

All at once, she didn't feel beaten and weary and hopeless any longer. She clung to Tip and whispered his name over and over in a broken sort of way.

He kissed her again, lingeringly, savouring to the fullest extent, the sweetness of her mouth. "I wish it was Graduation time now, so we could get married, right away," he said in a disgruntled tone. "I wish Sis wasn't so keen on me making a big s p l a s h in the Diplomatic puddle! I'd like to be a professional Coach like Bart. I'd like... But what's the use? Rita's done so much for me. I've got to play things her way."

Dulcie said slowly, selecting her words with great care, "Rita always has sort of decided things for you. Hasn't she, Tip?"

Tip murmured gruffly, "I don't know about that." His arm tightened around Dulcie till he hurt her but she did not dare to protest for fear she would put an end to confidences. "Yes. You're right, Dulcie. You've hit the nail right on the head. Rita does do my thinking for me. And I hate it!"

Dulcie wanted to ask, "Did she pick *me* out for you, Tip? And why did she nominate me, if my intuition on that score is right?"

But of course she couldn't ask a question like that. Though it nagged at the fringes of her mind and refused to go away.

Tip asked abruptly, "Look, Dulcie. Let's get married! We could do it tonight. We could just drive right straight through to the Nevada border. You can get married in Nevada without any waiting. What do you say, darling?"

Dulcie hesitated. She was tempted to accept Tip. If only her father hadn't been in such danger....

SHE SAID slowly, "I'm too tired to think now, Tip. Let's put the idea under wraps for a little while. Maybe till next week. There are things..." She let her voice trail off.

Tip was surprisingly understanding. "Yeah. I guess you're right. You don't want to get married on a date that'll always mean tragedy and sorrow to you. I get it, darling. Sure, we'll wait a little while. Only, don't forget that I love you."

His lips came down, hard and demanding on her own.

Dulcie stirred in his arms. "We'd better go back, Tip," she murmured thinly.

Jason Keyes was on the verge of leaving when they came in. Dulcie very conscious of her mussed hair and kiss-crushed mouth, tried to be nonchalant. He looked at her and those keen blue eyes of his expressed amusement.

He said nothing of what he was thinking. He merely murmured, "I think I've got the background picture of your father's life, Dulcie. I guess I'll be racing along now." He added, "Mind coming out to my car with me. It's parked around the corner. I'd like to talk to you alone for a moment."

Dulcie said in a confused way, that she'd be glad to go with him. She was surprised to find out that she spoke the truth.

He shook hands warmly with Rita. He told her again how much he had

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enjoyed the wonderful dinner. Bart said, "It's been a real pleasure, meeting you, Mr. Keyes. I know you'll get the Professor off, if anybody can."

Dulcie thought, "He's got everybody on his side! Even Tip is looking at him with unprejudiced eyes! If they only knew..."

Then she was out in the beauty of the night alone with Jason Keyes, and such excitement possessed her that she was startled and horrified.

Jason snapped at her, "Tomorrow, you're going to think up some excuse, and break your engagement to Tip McLean!"

She felt a pleasurable thrill cascade over her body. "Why? Jealous?" she asked impudently.

His answer was like a dash of cold water thrown in her face. "Not at all. But I don't want you to follow in your step-mother's footsteps! After all, I can't get the revenge I want so much, if somebody *kills* you, Dulcie!"

Her breath hurt her throat. "You think Tip killed Linna?" she whispered cold with horror. "Oh, you're

wrong! Tip couldn't have done such a thing! He's not a strong sort of character. He's a wonderful boy but..." She stopped, horrified at what she was saying.

Jason said, "I agree with you. Tip McLean is not a strong silent man! Quite the contrary. I'm surprised that anyone so much in love as you obviously are, could realize the fact."

They came to where his car was parked. It was a long, low glittering job. Dulcie said coldly, "Why park so far away?"

Jason smiled at her. "I didn't want anyone to know I was outside. I wanted to snoop and hear what that charming and beautiful Rita, for instance, was saying to you."

Dulcie tried to think back and remember what Rita had been saying when the doorbell pealed and Jason walked in.

She got into the car unaided by Jason. He slid under the wheel but he did not start the motor.

"Have you any relatives who would try to hire me to defend your father?" he asked surprisingly.

Dulcie blinked. "I haven't any relatives. Except my father."

HE CONSIDERED that, as if he wondered if she were lying. He seemed to decide to accept her statement as true. For he went on, "A woman rang up at my office, a short time after you left. She did not give her name. She said it was perfect nonsense to suspect the Professor, and I quote her exact words! I asked her name again. She paid no attention. She said I must take Professor Gilbert's case and save his life. She offered me five thousand dollars cash."

"Oh!" said Dulcie startled and curious.

"Too bad I turned the offer down, wasn't it, Miss High and Mighty Gilbert?" he taunted her.

Dulcie glared at him. She said with spirit, "If you intend to marry me, I wish you'd stop calling me 'Miss Gilbert,' with nasty qualifying adjectives!"

He looked at her in a surprised sort of way. Then he laughed, a reluctantly admiring note in his voice. He said, "How right you are, Dulcie. I haven't heard you call me Jason yet. Do so, by all means."

He waited. Dulcie wished she had left well enough alone!

"Jason," she said in as matter-of-fact a tone as she could manage. Even so, her voice got little ripples in it. She wondered what on earth was the matter with her.

He asked, "Where did you go with Tip?"

That surprised her. "To the Point," she said.

"Show me how to get there," he snapped.

She thought, "He's the most unpredictable man I've ever met!"

She complied, making her directions brief and to the point. He nodded showing that he understood.

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He drove the car easily and well, she noticed. There was nothing reckless about his driving. He took no unnecessary chances.

When they reached the Point, he stopped the car and turned off the motor. He took her into his arms. She found out she was trembling. He said curtly, "Don't get any idea that I *like* kissing you, any more than any man likes kissing just any woman who happens to be handy!"

With that insulting statement, he proceeded to kiss the heart right out of Dulcie's body!

She hated him, and she was filled with hurt pride and fury. Incredibly she heard him continue, before he kissed her again. "There is enough jealous male in my make-up to hate the sight of your mouth all crushed out of shape by another man's kisses! That is why I've brought you up here, to make you forget that weakling and his stupid love making. That is why I'm kissing you now. But don't go getting any idea that ours is to be a real marriage. It's a spite marriage, Dulcie, and don't you ever lose sight of the fact!"

His mouth covered her own. She tried to fight against the insidious magic of his kiss of hate, but it was no use. Thrills cascaded along her veins and her heart went mad. She clung to him and gave him back kiss for kiss till they both were breathless and spent.

Then all at once he pushed her from him. He said, his voice thick with anger, "That's enough of that! You're more dangerous than I thought! Remember. Don't tell anybody I'm going to marry you. And—break your engagement to Tip McLean!"

Chapter Five

DULCIE did not break her engagement to Tip.

She didn't know whether or not Jason was aware of that fact. Ever afterwards, she remembered the next week in a blur of horror.

There was Linna's funeral, a swift, furtive affair, to avoid the hordes of morbidly-minded curiosity seekers. There was the formal arrest of Professor Gilbert on charge of murder. Which immediately was followed by the official statement that the famous defense lawyer, Jason Keyes, who never had lost a case, was to defend the professor.

During that blurred, nightmare week, Dulcie saw Jason twice. Each time, he summoned her to his office, where he was surrounded by heaps of legal papers and big, dull-looking books with the very smell of the Law about them. Each time, he asked her questions in a swift, staccato fashion, which took no heed of her as a woman, or indeed, as a human being. She simply was a means to find out something he could not discover elsewhere.

Each time, she saw Miss Morse, the efficient secretary, looking at her with cold eyes.

Each time, she went back to Rita and Tip's house, feeling as if the end of the world had come.

She told herself angrily that the fact that Jason Keyes treated her like a recording machine had nothing to do with the low ebb of her spirits. That instead, it was because she made it a habit to visit her father at the prison after seeing Jason, which made her feel so depressed. At that back of her mind, there was a nagging doubt, that frightened her.

Jason told her curtly on the first occasion, that she could not remain at her own home until the machinery of the law had decided the guilt or innocence of her father. Since the house had been in Linna's name.

Rita had insisted that she stay with them. Jason hadn't seemed pleased. He repeated his admonition that she was not to tell anyone her method of "payment" for Jason's defense of her father. He told her, grudgingly, that he supposed she might as well stay there as anywhere.

Rita soon ferreted out the worry that was gnawing at Dulcie's mind about money. She said, "Darling, but how simply absurd! You'll have loads of money. As soon as your father is free. Let me lend you enough to get along with, my dear."

Dulcie thought of the fact that she was pledged to marry Jason Keyes,

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if he managed to get her father freed. She shook her head stubbornly. "No," she said. "I'll manage somehow. I—I've been thinking of looking for a job."

She had been afraid Rita would laugh at her and tell her that she couldn't find a job no matter how hard she tried. Instead, Rita put her arm round Dulcie and gave her an impulsive hug.

"The very thing, darling!" she cooed. "How stupid of me not to think of it, straight off! Nellie quit last week at the Campus Shoppe! You can take her place. You know the stock. You buy all your clothes there. It's a simply marvelous idea!"

Dulcie said uncertainly, "Do you think I could be a help, Rita? Really and truly. Not—charity!"

Rita said, "Of course, Dulcie. Come along with me this very morning. You can start out right away."

Dulcie, feeling excited and important at the idea of earning her own living, went racing into the bedroom to find the coat Linna had bought for her at the Campus Shoppe a few weeks before.

As they drove down to the shop in Rita's car, Dulcie remembered something. "How about your bosses?" she demanded. "Maybe they won't agree with you that I'd be a help to the Campus Shoppe?"

RITA WAS busy threading through traffic and attending to her driving. But Dulcie got the idea from her profile that Rita suddenly, was very angry about something.

She decided she had been mistaken when Rita said smoothly, "What I say, goes! And I've an idea you'll love the work at the shop."

Dulcie did love the work.

She knew Rita's stock very well, since she and Linna always had spent hours looking at things, encouraged by Rita. Everything she wore, as a matter of fact, came from the shop.

There was only one thing that was hard to take. People came to stare at Dulcie, if not to buy! Just as curiosity-seekers still strolled by the Gilbert home and even ventured into the front garden to steal a spray of oleander blossoms or to pick some roses as a grisly souvenir, so did both the college set and older people, flock to the Campus Shoppe, to get a glimpse of the professor's daughter who might be an orphan if the gas chamber claimed her father!

When Dulcie heard somebody say that very thing, her blood went cold and she began to shake all over as if she had a bad chill. She slipped away to the telephone in the back room and rang up Jason Keyes.

The minute she heard his voice, she felt reassured. He had a very thrilling voice. It was a flexible voice which expressed his every mood. Now, when he spoke to Dulcie there was the hint of laughter rippling in his voice. Till he found out who she was, and then, on the moment, the echo of laughter went away and coldness came into his tone.

Dulcie said, "What are you doing about my father's defense, Jason? I'm beginning to be afraid! Suppose your silly idea of revenge is strong enough to make you purposely lose the case for Dad. Suppose you—you want him to die!" Her voice trailed off.

He said, "You have got a fine case of nerves, haven't you, Dulcie? I assure you I will not lose your father's case. I wouldn't miss having a lengthy revenge which stretches out through the years, for anything in this world!"

He added, before she could speak, "There's something else, too. I gave you my word of honor. Funny as it may appear to you, my word is important to me."

Dulcie said, "I wish you'd let me tell Tip and Rita the truth. I feel like such a heel, living with them and having them so wonderful to me, when all the time, I'm not going to marry Tip."

He said callously, "Don't worry about them, Dulcie. When you get your fortune, you can give Rita a lump sum as heart-balm. You'll be surprised to find out how that will heal her lacerated feelings!"

Dulcie said angrily, "I don't think

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that was a very nice thing for you to say, about my friends."

He laughed. "Sometimes when you get mad, what you say sounds as if it came straight from Godey's Ladies Book."

Before she could think up anything cutting enough to reply to that, he told her curtly he had work to do and not to worry. Then he terminated the conversation without even saying goodbye!

Dulcie sat in the little back room which was a sort of storeroom, staring at the telephone and thinking anew how much she hated Jason Keyes. While she sat there, she heard Rita and a man talking in the little office next door. The transom over the door was open a trifle, she noticed, which accounted for the fact that she could hear so well.

THE MAN was saying in an angry voice, "Where is that ten thousand dollars, Miss McLean? I've been patient. You told me when you bought this shop, that you would have the full twenty thousand for me in a year—and ten thousand in six months. The six months are up. I've not seen a penny of your money."

Rita cooed, "Please, dear Mr. Stanton, don't be impatient. I assure you, I'll have the money by next month at the latest!"

Dulcie realized that she was eavesdropping. She tiptoed past the office and went back to the shop, where she found two customers waiting. As she showed the swank coats in which the girls were interested, her mind seethed with questions.

She remembered one time that Rita had said a Mr. Stanton owned the Campus Shoppe. Now it seemed that Rita had bought the shop! No wonder she had been able to hire Dulcie without consulting anyone! But why hadn't she frankly *told* Dulcie that she had bought the shop and was having a struggle to pay for it?

She still was puzzling over all this when Tip came over that night to drive her home, since Rita had a date for dinner somewhere. Dulcie wondered if it was a date with Mr. Stanton, to try and pacify him!

Tip said, after he had driven in silence for a few blocks, "Have you thought things over, Dulcie? Have you considered marrying me, right away?"

Dulcie bit down hard on her lower lip for a moment, then she said slowly, fumbling for the right words, "I—I can't marry you right now, Tip. It's impossible."

She groped about in her mind for a reasonable explanation which he would accept. She went on, her words sounding awfully flimsy in her own ears, "Tip, look! It would put both of us back in the spotlight, if you got married now! You remember how awful it was, to have to comb reporters out of our hair all the time? Well, things have quieted down a bit. But if we elope, we'll stir the whole thing up again and I don't think I could take that."

She paused, out of breath with her own eloquence.

The words had rushed out in a flood, tumbling over each other in their eagerness to be spoken. Underlying everything she said was the horrible uncertainty about ever being able to marry Tip. Because of her promise to Jason.

But she just couldn't marry a man she didn't love! A man who wanted her just to get revenge for something which really never had happened! She got quite frantic, thinking of it. And yet, for her father's sake... Her mind went racing round and round like midget cars on a circular-track speedway.

Tip's voice, sounding almost relieved, brought her back to realities.

He was saying, "I think you're right, Dulcie! I don't want to get married like that, anyhow. I want us to be married with a lot of fuss and fanfare. I know most men say they hate a big wedding, but I want something to remember. Something to make us *feel* married!"

Sobs caught at Dulcie's throat.

For an instant, she laid her hand on his on the steering wheel of the car. She whispered, "Tip, dear, if you felt like this about our wedding, why were you so—so sort of insistent about us eloping?"

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HE SAID frankly, "Oh, that was all Rita's idea, Dulcie. You know how crazy about you she is. She's been nagging at me to elope with you, so I could help you through all this—horror. But all along I figured you'd rather play it the other way."

He stopped the car in front of the house, but he did not get out. Instead, he took her into his arms, gently, and she felt him tremble with emotion. He looked down into her face in a very adult way, as if suddenly he had grown up.

"You're the sweetest thing I've ever known or will know in my life, Dulcie," he said huskily. "Don't ever fail me, darling."

His lips claimed hers, demandingly and yet gently, too.

It was a kiss which made Dulcie

feel quite frantic. Because of its very sweetness, she thought of Jason Keyes. And she wondered how it would seem to be kissed by Jason gently, instead of with hate and contempt in the touch of his lips on her own.

She murmured something and slipped out of his embrace and said, "Darling, unhand me! I've got to get dressed for Clovis' dinner. Remember, she asked me a week ago."

He said, "Sure, angel. I remember. I'm eating at Bart's place. Want me to drive you to Clovis' house?"

She hesitated then she nodded. "I'll be ready in about fifteen minutes, Tip."

As she went into the house, she heard the telephone ringing and the sound had that forlorn cadence which seemed to Dulcie to mean it had been ringing for a long time.

She said, "Hello," breathlessly.

It was Jason Keyes!

He said, his voice very tense, "Dulcie, this is very important. I've been doing a lot of work on your father's case. I've unearthed something—big. Are you alone in the house or is somebody nearby?"

Dulcie said, "I'm alone at the moment. Rita's gone out to dinner somehere. I'm dressing to go to a friend's house myself. Tip's gone to the nearest shop to get some cigarettes."

"Good. Now get this. Meet me at the airport in exactly an hour and ten minutes."

She stammered, "W-what?"

He repeated, sounding impatient, "I said you were to meet me at the airport by eight or a little before. Don't take any luggage. Don't tell anybody you're going anywhere. Simply walk out of the house and grab a taxi to the airport."

Dulcie felt the room pitch and toss under her feet. She managed to whisper, "But I don't understand..."

"You and I are on our way to be married, Dulcie!" He might have been discussing the weather for all the emotion there was in his voice at that statement.

She said, "But—my father isn't free yet!"

He said, his voice sounding very definite, "I don't think your father is going to have to stand trial, Dulcie. If I get a few more pieces of this jigsaw puzzle, I'll have the real murderer."

She gasped, "But I don't see..."

He interrupted, sounding more impatient than ever, "If you don't marry me, you may follow your stepmother, Dulcie! Your life is in danger."

She gripped the phone till her fingers bent backward.

"Don't tell anybody you are elop-

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ing with me. *Your very life* may depend on that, Dulcie!"

She made some sort of a croaking answer. He said, crossly, "Well, how about it? Are you going to come, voluntarily? Or must I come there and drag you along with me? To save your wretched life!"

Just then Tip came in, whistling a gay tune.

EVIDENTLY Jason heard that whistle over the phone.

Jason's voice changed a little, growing more interested and slightly eager. "Tip McLean doesn't happen to be at the house right now, does he?"

She said, "Yes," faintly.

Jason snapped, "Get rid of him! The man isn't going to marry you in any case. You've made a bargain with me and you're going to keep it. But even if there was no bargain, you might be signing your own death warrant if you married him!"

"No!" said Dulcie violently.

"Don't be a fool!" he flung at her. "Get rid of him. Don't tell him anything of this conversation. Say I was calling, concerning your father's defense. Remember. It may mean your life, if you let him know of our marriage plans!"

Dulcie said, "I won't..."

She was aware that he had terminated the conversation. There was only that empty singing of the wires that is such a desolate sort of sound. Slowly, her hand unsteady, she replaced the telephone.

She went back to the other room, and Tip.

Tip seemed to have changed. A minute before he was wonderful. She had been more in love with him than she ever had been. She had felt tender and protective toward Tip, and at the same time had thrilled to the magic of his kisses.

Now, suddenly, because of the ugly things Jason had said, Tip was a stranger. A hateful, dangerous stranger. Someone she could not trust.

She thought, "Murder is hideous. It makes ever-widening ripples of distrust. It colors everything with its mud. It makes you afraid of your best friend!"

Tip was waiting for her to say something. He said, "What's the matter, Dulcie?" He added when she did not reply immediately, "You look as if somebody had hit you with a blackjack. What gives?"

She drew a long breath. She flung Jason's admonitions into the ash-can. She gasped out, "I was just talking to Jason Keyes on the phone, Tip. He—said he's—finding out things. He said he—suspected you!"

As she spoke, she felt tension build up in the room till she could scarcely breathe for the Fear that stalked about seeking prey. But as she finished speaking, she saw Tip relax visibly, and she thought, "It's as if Tip squared his shoulders for a blow which never came!"

He said almost indifferently, "That's a lot of hooey, darling. I wouldn't have hurt Linna for anything in the world."

Dulcie, her senses sharpened by the tension she had been so much aware of, whispered, "Who was it that you *thought* Jason suspected, Tip?"

A closed, remote look came over his face on the moment. It was as if a curtain was pulled down, shutting Dulcie out. He said, "Don't talk silly, Dulcie. I don't suspect anybody of anything."

She knew he was lying. But she was sure also that he wouldn't tell her more than that, so she asked no further questions.

She said stiffly, "I've got to change my dress, Tip. That telephone call delayed me." She fled to the bedroom and began dressing in frantic haste. Her hands trembled so, she had trouble pulling the bright gold wool dress over her head. She was fond of that dress. She thought, "Of course I'm not going through with this. I'm not going to marry Jason. But if I did marry him, the yellow wool is my prettiest dress."

THERE was a matching yellow wool hat with nailhead trimming. And a camel's hair coat. Catching

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up gloves and handbag, she went out to face Tip, feeling her conscience shriek at her for deceiving him this way.

Tip looked at her. He said, "You look pretty neat, Baby."

He came close to her and drew his fingertips gently along her cheek in a lover's light caress. He said, "Don't worry so, Dulcie. I've a hunch your dad is going to be all right."

That did it!

All of Dulcie's courage evaporated like snow under the sun's kiss. She said, "Oh, Tip, darling, you're so sweet! And I can't ever marry you! Oh, darling, I've *got* to marry Jason Keyes. It's his price for defending dad! He made me promise not to tell. He threatened all sorts of things if I did tell. But I can't go on with this secret on my conscience."

She was crying and it took him a little while to disentangle what she meant from the sobs.

When he did understand, his face went grim. He said, "You mean to stand there and tell me that the lawyer demanded that you *marry* him, as the price of your father's life!"

She nodded violently. "And he hates me," she finished forlornly. "It's a spite affair. He's sore because he thinks Dad ruined his brother's life by flunking him out of college. He means to take it out on me by marrying me."

Tip said, "We've got to find Sis and tell her about this. Of course you're not going to marry him, Dulcie. It's the craziest thing I've ever heard of. But we can't endanger your dad's life, either."

Some element of caution nagged at Dulcie's mind. "I just told *you*, Tip!" she said slowly. "Let's not pass this on to Rita nor anybody else."

But that he would not have. He made her get into the car. While she made her face presentable by the use of her compact and lipstick, he drove very fast to all of Rita's favorite eating places. In the third one, a chop suey place, they found Bart and Rita cosily eating together.

"So I wasn't right about her having a date with Mr. Stanton," thought Dulcie, with one small part of her mind.

Tip blurted out everything to both Bart and Rita, before Dulcie could stop him.

Rita got quite white on the moment.

"The man wants to marry you, Dulcie!" she gasped. "Why, how horrible. How simply, utterly horrible!"

Dulcie said slowly, "I've got to save Dad. What am I going to do, Rita? I've gone almost crazy trying to figure things out."

Bart said slowly, "He doesn't want you for a real wife. Is that the score, Dulcie? A—a sort of kissless bride deal? Is that it?"

Dulcie blushed. "Yes," she said almost savagely.

BART PURSED his lips for a second then he said surprisingly, "All right then. Go through a marriage ceremony with him. It won't mean a thing. Let him get your father freed, and then you walk out on him. Leave him flat. You would have kept your promise. You signed an agreement that you'd marry him. Not that you'd stay on with him, as his wife."

Rita said, "I'd never have thought of that, Bart. But I do believe you have a point there. Yes, Dulcie. Play it that way. Fool the creature!"

The only dissenting voice was that of Tip. He said, "No! I won't have my girl marrying another man! It isn't decent!"

The other two talked him down after a few minutes. Finally Tip gave his grudging consent. Dulcie thought, "Tip does very little real thinking on his own. Other people do his thinking for him. I don't like that."

Rita looked at her watch. "Tip, drive Dulcie to the airport right away! Don't let that Jason character see you, however!"

Tip growled something in reply. He and Dulcie went down stairs and out into the beauty of the California night, in silence. Not the sort of

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companionable silence she had shared so often with Tip in the past. No. This was a thick, icy miserable sort of silence.

Tip said, finally as he drove the car recklessly fast, "I still think this stinks, Dulcie! Can't you figure some other way out than for you to marry this guy?"

Dulcie murmured, "I've thought and thought, Tip, till my brain's about broken. I can't think of any way out. I couldn't have my dad—die for something he didn't do."

Tip said, his voice sullen, "Maybe any lawyer could get him off, Dulcie! Maybe we're building too much into this Jason fellow!"

She shook her head. "I went to three lawyers. Good ones. I asked them if they'd defend dad. They all refused on ethical grounds...Because they thought he was guilty!" Her voice broke.

Tip stopped the car by the side of the road. He took Dulcie into his arms and kissed her with a savage sort of intensity which made her feel as if he hated her as much as Jason did.

She could force no warmth into her own lips, and after a while he let her go and drove on, with a muttered oath uttered under his breath!

He said after a while as the brilliant lights of the airport came into view, "Dulcie, if I thought for one minute that you were in love with this Jason Keyes fellow, I think I'd kill both of you!"

He spoke with such violence that she was startled. She said slowly, "Oh, Tip darling, don't let's talk about—killing."

He stopped the car again, coming to such a swift halt that she was thrown forward, violently. He swept her into his arms again and held her so close that she could scarcely draw enough breath into her lungs to keep alive. Then he kissed her.

Maybe if the thought hadn't flashed into her mind, *"This* must have been the way Tip kissed Linna!" Dulcie might have been more thrilled by that passionate kiss. As it was, she felt as if her lips burned and shriveled under the intensity of his kiss. And when, at long last, he stopped kissing her, she thought, "There are hidden fires in Tip that I never suspected! He's not the simple, un-complex boy he's always seemed to me."

THEN SHE was rather horrified that she could thus cold-bloodedly analyze her emotions.

Luckily, Tip could know nothing of what she was thinking. "You shouldn't have promised you'd marry that man! Not even to save your father's life."

He buried his lips in the hollow of her throat as if the very beat of the artery there, drew him closer to her.

Dulcie whispered huskily, "I—I don't know quite how it did happen, Tip! I was all emotional and scared and miserable. And there was dad..." Her voice trailed off and a stubborn note came as she went on, after a moment's pause, "I *had* to save Dad's life, Tip! Surely you can see that!"

Tip said, "Don't do this, Dulcie! Stall that man! Give me a little time! I think I—*know*—who killed Linna!"

That was so unexpected that she gasped, and went cold all over. "Tip!" she whispered.

He understood. "No. It isn't me!" he flung at her, almost savagely. Then he repeated, "Stall Jason Keyes, Dulcie. Go with him to Nevada. That'll take some time... Then pull a faint. Or do something drastic

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like that, to keep him from marrying you. I love you so much that I'd sacrifice almost anybody, to keep you from marrying another man. Even a marriage that's a phoney."

Dulcie hesitated, then she said, "All right, Tip. It's a bargain. I'll do that."

He let her out on the fringe of the airport. He said, "Remember, Dulcie! Don't marry him. I think I'll go mad, if you do!"

He got back into the car, after kissing her violently and almost as if he hated her. He drove off at a violent pace which made her fearful for his safety.

It was two minutes before eight when she went into the airport station.

Jason came hurrying up to her, looking angry. He caught her roughly by the elbow, muttering, "Why run it so fine, Dulcie! I began to think you weren't coming."

Dulcie managed to find spirit enough to say, "I don't know why I did come! I promised I'd marry you, *if* you got my father free. He's still in jail. Yet you insist on my—marrying you."

She had to stop. The repetition of that word, "marry" was too ominous.

He paid little attention. He was hurrying her out through the passageway which led to the air-field. The relieved stewardess smiled at them and said, "I began to think you people weren't going to make it! On you go! There's your plane, straight in front of you, warming for the take-off."

Dulcie mounted the steps leading to the plane, feeling as if she faced the guillotine.

She was surprised to have Jason shove her into one of the line of single seats, and take the seat in front of her for his own use.

He said, yawning, "I worked all last night on this case. I'm dead for sleep. See you in Reno!"

With that, he settled down and put his head back and went to sleep. He slept calmly and peacefully, while Dulcie sat behind him, tense and terrified, speeding through the night toward her wedding with a hated stranger!

Chapter Six

JASON WOKE, just as the stewardess told passengers to fasten belts for the landing, and the NO SMOKING sign flashed on at the front of the plane.

Dulcie looked angrily at Jason. He looked, she thought, remarkably wide awake and completely refreshed. While she, herself felt as if she looked like an ageing chorus girl at four in the morning.

When he helped Dulcie from the plane, his hand touched her wrist momentarily and she got a strange thrill almost like an electric shock.

That made her angry. She lashed out at him to cover her momentary weakness.

She said, "I hope you're proud of yourself at this moment, Mr. Jason Keyes! Just because your brother was too weak to take a set-back, you're making four people intensely unhappy!"

He caught her up on that, on the moment. "Four people?" he snapped as they walked over to the waiting cars, which would drive them into The Biggest Little City in the World, as Reno signs all proudly proclaimed. "What do you mean by that?"

Dulcie was trapped and she knew it. She faced Jason with an insolence she was far from feeling, "I should have told my fiance immediately, Mr. Keyes," she said coldly. "I did tell Tip tonight! I told Tip and Rita and Bart, that you were forcing me into a hateful travesty of marriage."

They had a car to themselves. Jason closed the glass between the driver and themselves. Then he faced her grimly and her heart beat a little faster.

"You disobeyed me, after I told you it might mean your very life?" he said slowly.

She flung at him, "So you say. But I don't believe you!"

He had that exasperated expression on his face. As if he wouldn't

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have minded choking her, she thought.

"I'm counting to ten, so I won't tell you exactly what sort of an idiot you are!" His voice cut like a lash. "All right then! Since you have played the fool and told these people you were going to marry me, what happened? Who raved and roared and who took the whole thing in her stride?"

Dulcie said, "*Her* stride! That's what you said. You know perfectly well that Bart and of course, Tip, hit the ceiling."

"So the charming and beautiful Rita took this casually, did she?" His tone was thoughtful. "Well, go on! Fill in the blanks! What happened exactly when you tossed in your dear little bombshell?"

Dulcie froze. She murmured in a remote tone, "I really don't recall!"

He did shake her then. Literally. And not gently, either.

Dulcie was so surprised she gasped and stared at him when the shaking was over and his fingers stopped digging into the soft flesh of her shoulders.

"Stop playing games!" he gritted at her. "Grow up! This isn't hide-the-thimble, you know! It's kill or be killed."

She wasn't thinking very straight. She faltered, "Kill or be killed! You mean—I've got to kill somebody?"

To her further astonishment, he burst out laughing. "The only person you yearn to kill is myself!" he chuckled. "And I assure you, I'm not letting you get your knife into my heart, my dear Dulcie!"

It was strange, but even the word, "dear," uttered mockingly by him, had the power to make Dulcie's heart race.

She thought, "It's funny. When I'm with this man, the rest of the world doesn't seem to exist. With everybody else, even with Tip, I'm conscious of everything that goes on. But when Jason Keyes is around, he shuts out the rest of the universe."

She was glad that they stopped in front of the modern-looking very wide-awake hotel, gleaming with lights and teeming with people.

Jason said, as he paid off the taxi driver, "Go in and register will you, Dulcie? To save time, you might as well register us as Mr. and Mrs. Keyes. I know some people. I've got connections at court here, so it won't be long before I have the marriage license and we can get this thing over."

Dulcie went into the hotel. She walked up to the desk. The bored-appearing clerk said, without even looking up, "Full up. Nothing."

SHE WAS relieved. She drifted away from the desk. She sat down in one of the big chairs in the ornate lobby, and perched there stiffly, trying to think what to do.

Tip had suggested fainting or pulling some sort of a trick. She had the idea that Jason Keyes would see through anything of that sort in a moment. Besides, it didn't seem quite fair, somehow.

For the first time since this nightmare had begun, she faced facts squarely.

She had made a bargain. True, when she made it, she hadn't meant to keep that bargain and it had been made under threats and duress, as a legal man would have said. But just the same, she had made a contract.

"I've got to marry him!" she said, and was horrified to find that she had spoken aloud! She glanced round with heightened color hoping no one had heard her.

No one seemed to be paying any attention to her. Everybody was too busy having a hectic time, to wipe out underlying heartbreak and bitterness. Or so it seemed to Dulcie. Her thoughts raced on, "I hate being married in a town where divorces are the order of the day!"

She blinked. Why should she care *where* she went through an empty ceremony which would make her a spite-bride? Here, she had been thinking of her forthcoming wedding as genuine!

Jason came back. He had the license with him and he asked her to sign. She was proud of the fact that her hand did not shake as she wrote her name.

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He said, "There's one of those Wedding Chapel places down the street. Let's go!"

They came to the place, which had WEDDINGS PERFORMED—NIGHT AND DAY—in an electrically-lighted sign on the front lawn. For the first time, Jason did not seem so sure of himself, Dulcie thought. But she couldn't be quite sure about that. She was practically terrified to tears, herself. But along with the fear, was a surging sense of excitement. She had never such excitement before. It made her wonder.

THE WEDDING itself had all the unreal quality of a dream.

There was a Justice of the Peace, who seemed to enjoy the sound of his own pompous, booming voice. There was his mousy wife, and his giggling daughter, who both acted as witnesses.

"I pronounce you, man and wife!" the Justice intoned in his melodious voice.

Dulcie thought, "I said I wouldn't marry this man! Yet, somehow, without knowing exactly how it's happened, here I am—married to him! Just how did this come about, anyhow?"

There was no time to pursue that train of thought.

The Justice was saying, rather impatiently, "You may kiss *your wife*, sir!"

Jason hesitated and for a moment, Dulcie thought he wasn't going to kiss her. But convention proved too strong for him, it seemed. He bent and touched her lips with his own, briefly.

Her lips tingled wildly at that casual contact. Which fact angered Dulcie and woke her, in a measure, from the numbness which seemed to hold her fettered.

The financial transaction took quite a time. But at last everything was over. They went out into the gayety of the little city. Dulcie said suddenly, "It wasn't legal! I didn't have any flowers."

He looked at her, almost angrily. "This wasn't a love-wedding!" he reminded her curtly. "You're a spite bride. Remember?"

"How could I forget?" murmured Dulcie, but her tone was almost gay.

Jason hesitated. He said, "We might as well have this legal in your eyes." He marched her into the nearest florist's shop and demanded a corsage of orchids. He paid a gigantic price for the two lovely flowers. "Gift of the groom to the bride," he said. There was mockery in his tone, but just the same, Dulcie's heart thudded as she thanked him and pinned the corsage on her coat.

Jason talked to her as they continued on their way. Dulcie always had the idea that he talked to her to clarify his own thoughts rather than to be polite and manufacture conversation.

He murmured, "We've got two courses open to us at this point. We can catch a plane back to town almost immediately. Or we can remain overnight in Reno. It will depend on what sort of news I'll get, when we go back to the hotel. Nora's wiring me about something I've had her doing for me.

Nora Morse's name was like a dash of ice water, so far as Dulcie was concerned. She said slowly, "Do you think Tip killed my stepmother, Jason? Because, if you do, you're wrong."

He paid no attention, but quickened his steps a little.

HE SAID, "I want you to go on living, Dulcie. I don't want my revenge on you and your father to stop too soon! So that's the main reason I made you marry me, now. I think you're in grave danger. I'm not sure which one of the three is guilty, but one of them is...So it's extremely dangerous for you to be stopping at the McLean house."

Dulcie was startled. "You mean—Tip, or Rita or...?" She wasn't sure about the next name and she paused.

"Bart!" Jason said it for her.

They entered the hotel, filled with

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people meeting each other for the evening in preparation for an evening of gambling, or people leaving. Jason told Dulcie rather curtly, to sit down and wait until he inquired at the desk for the wire he was expecting.

Dulcie chose a chair where she could watch him. She saw him get not one wire but two. She saw, too, that he seemed perturbed by the contents of one of the telegrams. Her pulses quickened with fear.

She thought, "It was Bart's class ring by Linna's body! But Bart's such a wonderful guy! He's made a fetish of fair play and good sportsmanship! Surely he couldn't be capable of killing a woman!"

Jason came back to her. He said stiffly, "I must go back to Berkeley right away, Dulcie. But I think it might be a good plan for you to stay here!"

Dulcie said flatly, "No. I'll leave by the next plane, if you go off and leave me."

She spoke so decidedly that he did not guess she had exactly a dollar seventy-five in her modish antelope purse! That much was evident to Dulcie with his next sentence, "You're stubborn, Dulcie. It's your safety I'm thinking of."

Dulcie looked at him. "The three people you suspect, know I'm in Reno," she pointed out. "It would be quite logical for one of them to come to Nevada to do the job of wiping me off the earth wouldn't it?"

He glanced at her speculatively. "He thinks I'm a bird-brain. And when I, occasionally, come up with something quite bright he's astounded! He must have known awfully dumb females!"

Then she thought of Nora Morse, who certainly was not dumb, and she sighed involuntarily.

Jason went over to the airlines information desk. He hurried back to her." We can leave almost immediately," he said, his voice sounding preoccupied with something else. "Let's go!"

Chapter Seven

THE PLANE ride back to Berkeley was a confused blur to Dulcie. This time, it was she who slept on the plane, after first taking off her orchids and giving them to the stewardess to care for, lest she crush them.

It was almost dawn when they drove along the quiet streets whose dark shuttered houses made Dulcie feel that she and Jason were the only two people in the world.

She hadn't considered where they were going. If she had thought about it at all, she had figured he'd take her back to the McLean's place. Instead he drove directly to a small house perched high on the side of a hill. He said, his voice gruff, "I'll feel safer if you stay here with me, tonight, Dulcie."

She said, before she took time to think, "But *will* I be safer here?" She meant, from the same person who had robbed Linna of life. Jason put a very different interpretation on her words.

He said stiffly, "I assure you, Dulcie, I have no idea of forgetting that this is a marriage that is a—mockery."

On that grim note they entered his house.

Dulcie was surprised to find that it was furnished in excellent taste. Books were everywhere. Flowers bloomed in the windowboxes. The window curtains were crisp and white. The house was tiny. Just four rooms. But it was quite perfect in its way.

She thought, "Somehow, I'd have imagined Jason lived in a hotel or something."

He took her coat and hung it in the clothes closet in the hall. He said, curtly, "You can take the bedroom. I think you'll find fresh linen on the bed. Mrs. Soames, who does

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my housekeeping, attends to such things for me."

Dulcie murmured, "I wouldn't think of turning you out of your room! Let me sleep in the front room."

They might have been two polite strangers, she thought amusedly. Then the fact came into her mind to taunt her, that she and Jason were in fact, strangers. Strangers who hated each other.

"Only I don't," Dulcie admitted mentally, glad at last to be honest. "I don't approve of the man and I think he's awfully dangerous. But—I don't hate him."

Jason went into the bedroom with her, to get his pajamas and robe and slippers.

Dulcie asked, "How about me? You wouldn't even let me pack a suitcase. So I have no night clothes with me, remember?"

Jason looked at her. It was a long, odd look which set Dulcie's heart to thundering.

"I'd forgotten that," he said flatly, after a moment. He burrowed about in a dresser drawer till he found what he was looking for. He came over and piled garments into Dulcie's arms.

She had expected Jason to give her a pair of his pajamas and she envisioned herself with trailing pant-legs and tucked-up sleeves. But what she was holding was a filmy pink nylon nightgown and a matching robe! Two strictly feminine garments.

She gasped.

Jason explained in a matter-of-fact manner, "Nora Morse often stays here when I'm on a case that takes me out of town. She hates living in a hotel room."

Dulcie put the nightgown and robe down as if they had burned her fingers. All at once, she was icily furious. She said, "Thank you just the same, but I'll sleep in my slip!"

He looked at her in a surprised sort of way. He took a step nearer. "Oh, for Pete's sake, don't go getting—ideas!" he snapped. "I'm never here when Nora Morse is around. And besides, why should you care?"

Dulcie tilted her chin. "Why indeed?" she demanded her tone congealing as it left her lips.

SHE ADDED, after a pulsating pause in which she seemed to hear her own heart roar in her ears, "I'm a spite bride, which suits me excellently! I wouldn't be really married to you for anything on this earth!"

"Wouldn't you?" he said and dangerous fires burned in his eyes. Before she could stir from the spot, he had her in his arms and was holding her so close that they seemed like one person. He repeated huskily, "Wouldn't you now, Mrs. Jason Keyes!"

Then he kissed her. It burned her mouth and set her heart aflame.

He kissed her again and she thought, dazedly, "I'm in love with him!" His kiss went on and on, and she could think no more. She knew only warm emotion.

All at once the telephone rang, shattering the spell which gripped them both. He gave a startled exclamation and stepped away from her as if she had turned into a nettle-bush. Dulcie's mouth went on wanting his kisses and her pulses leaped to the memory of his thrilling love-making.

Jason talked briefly over the telephone, his voice sounding excited. Finally, the telephone conversation over, he turned back to Dulcie.

"That was some man who refused to give his name. I didn't recognize his voice, either. But he told me he had important things to tell me about Linna Gilbert. He insists that I meet him immediately at the North Gates of the Campus."

Dulcie said, "Oh!" rather blankly.

He snapped at her, "I apologize for making love to you, Miss Gilbert. That wasn't in my—bargain, was it? Well, it won't happen again."

He was putting on his overcoat as he spoke. Dulcie went out into the hall with him, feeling very desolate.

He said, "Don't go away from this house, Dulcie. You'll be perfectly safe if you stay right here. I won't

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be gone any longer than is absolutely necessary."

The door banged shut. Dulcie was alone in the house that belonged to Jason Keyes. She thought, "It will be completely light soon. Dawn's streaking the sky." It was a comforting thought. She wanted night banished. This wedding night of hers which had been no real wedding night at all.

The telephone rang again. Dulcie bit her lips. She wondered whether or not she ought to answer. Finally she did. It was Tip and he sounded frantic.

"Why didn't you come back to the house, Dulcie ! Why didn't you call up? We've all been pretty worried, Dulcie."

She said, "We only got back a few moments ago, Tip."

He said, his voice reeking with jealousy even over the wires, "I suppose that jerk is right there with you!"

Before she took time to think, Dulcie answered, "No. Somebody rang him up. Something about the—the trial or.... Well, anyhow, he left."

"Good! Now's your chance to duck out!" Tip sounded jubilant. "I'll meet you at the corner in about fifteen minutes. It'll take me that long to drive over in my jalopy and pick you up."

"But..." began Dulcie.

"Meet me!" repeated Tip. The telephone banged down, ending the conversation.

"MAYBE Tip is the murderer!" thought Dulcie forlornly. "Maybe Tip wants me to meet him so he can murder me!"

She couldn't make herself quite believe that.

While she was thinking about it, she heard swift furtive footsteps mounting the front stairs and coming across the small porch. Her breath caught in her throat in a frightened way.

"Don't be a sap!" she told herself sternly. "So long as you don't leave the house, you're all right!"

The next second, she found out how false that was. For the person was putting a key in the lock and opening the front door!

Icy fingers seemed to be playing a tune on Dulcie's backbone. She whirled about with a small, frightened cry.

To her astonishment, Nora Morse stood there. Nora had her long hair in a knot at the back of her neck. She was dressed in a beautiful evening formal and she was looking at Dulcie as if she could chew her up and spit her out.

Nora said curtly, "Get out! I was the one who had Jason dash off on that wild goose chase to the Campus. I've got a man there who'll keep him for a while."

Dulcie repeated faintly, "*You* got Jason out of the way? But why?"

Nora glared at Dulcie. "Because Jason is my man, that's why!" she snapped. "And I'm not having anything interfere with my love life! If Jason wants a spite bride, he can have her. For a while. But little Nora is right on the spot to protect her property!"

Dulcie was surprised at the force of the fury which consumed her at Nora's words. She gasped out, "Have your precious Jason Keyes! I don't want him! I'm meeting my fiance right square now! And you can tell Jason for me that I'm getting an annulment of this phoney marriage of ours. I promised to marry Jason if he'd get my father free. I never said I'd live with him as his wife, or *stay* married to him!"

She dashed into the bedroom and caught up her coat, and scarf. She went racing out of the house, feeling white-hot with rage at Jason for his lie about Nora.

It was only when she had gone almost to the corner of the street that she remembered Jason's warning not to leave under any circumstances. Well, it was too late now. She wasn't going back. And if she did, most likely Nora wouldn't let her into the house. That house which Nora seemed to treat as her own!

Dulcie's anger flared up again, wiping out her fear.

A car was approaching at top sped. It slowed to a noisy stop be-

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side Dulcie and Rita's voice said, "Hop in, darling! Tip couldn't get the jalopy started so he sent me over for you."

Dulcie got in without question and Rita started the car on the moment. They went whizzing along at a fast pace. Dulcie saw that the sun was rising. She thought, "I'll bet there's a wonderful day ahead of us." There was the smell of spring warmth in the air.

Then all of a sudden Dulcie realized that Rita wasn't heading for her home. Instead she was going in the direction of Pleasant Valley and the tunnel.

Dulcie said, "Why the rush, Rita? Where's the fire?"

Rita gasped, "Oh! Didn't I tell you? How stupid of me, darling! Tip wasn't telephoning from *home*. He was out at Sue's place. We all were. Her husband is a lawyer, you know. We were discussing getting that annulment of your wedding. You can get it right away, Dulcie! Sue's husband will push it through the courts today! Then you'll be free and you can marry Tip right away! Oh, Dulcie, I've wanted you two to marry for such a long time!"

DULCIE surprised herself by saying, rather acidly, "I'm not in any great hurry to get an annulment! There's a woman in Jason's life. I want to annoy both of them as much as I can. I think it will make Nora positively sizzle, if I don't get an annulment for—Oh, for ages!"

The car swerved as if Rita had gripped the wheel so tightly that the car protested. Her voice was as cooing and smooth as always, however, as she murmured, "That's a stupid way to figure, Dulcie. Of course you want to be freed from that awful man as soon as possible. He always keeps his word. You didn't promise to stay married to him but you did go through a wedding ceremony with him. So of course he will keep his part of the bargain and get your father off."

She added pettishly, "It was such a *stupid* thing for the police to suspect your father in the first place!"

Dulcie was tired and emotionally wrought up. She said, making an issue of it, "I won't be pushed into getting an annulment of my marriage to Jason Keyes, Rita. Maybe I won't get an annulment at all!"

The air seemed to grow tense, with those words. Dulcie shivered. She thought, "Why, how funny. I'm trembling."

Rita sent the car across the road with a spiteful gesture and braked to a smooth stop. She turned and looked at Dulcie.

"You and I are going to have this out, here and now, Dulcie!" she snapped. "I can't see why you're acting so difficult! Tip is mad about you. I'm awfully fond of you. A wedding service such as you went through with Jason Keyes, means nothing at all."

In a perverse sort of way, Dulcie remembered her orchid corsage lying on the dresser at Jason's house. The memory of the orchids strengthened her resolve.

She said in a firm voice, "I'm fond of Tip and for a long while there, I thought I was in love with him. But maybe it just was because Tip was so popular at school and all the girls were crazy about him, and..."

She stopped.

She had been thinking aloud and not paying much attention to Rita. Now, something made her look at Rita and what she saw sent chills of terror to her very toes.

Rita was glaring at her, as if she hated her!

Rita said, and now the cooing note was gone from her voice and her tone was thick with fury, "Do you think, after all I've done to make the match between you and Tip that I'm going to let you ruin everything?"

Dulcie thought, "Why!...I'm afraid of Rita!" She felt cold all over and tremulous.

Rita said, "You are going to marry my brother! Do you hear? If you don't marry him, it will be the last thing you ever do in your life!"

Dulcie whispered, "I—I don't understand you, Rita!"

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Rita snapped, "Don't you?"

She looked at Dulcie and there was hatred and venom in her face and her eyes were like twin marbles made of ebony, as she said, "I won't *let* you turn my brother down! I'll kill you, if you don't get the annulment of this phoney marriage with that smart-alec lawyer! You won't go on living more than ten more minutes, if you don't promise to go through with the annulment!"

Dulcie thought, "This isn't happening. It can't be happening. I'm in the middle of a nightmare and I can't wake up!"

SHE TRIED to think of something to say, to reason with Rita. She tried to remember that this was Rita McLean, Tip's sister—the woman who had been fond of her for so long. The woman who had given her a job in her shop.

It wasn't any good.

That Rita seemed to have disappeared. Or maybe she'd never been. There was left, only this implacable woman with murder looking out of her eyes.

Murder!

"Linna," thought Dulcie. "Rita killed Linna! When a murderer has killed once, the second murder comes easy. Or so I've read. I'm all alone with Rita on this road that is so crowded with traffic later in the day, and which is so deserted now."

Rita said impatiently, "Well? Are you going to be sensible, Dulcie? Are you going to be smart? If you get the annulment right away, we won't remember this conversation. But if you don't do as I say, I'll kill you! I mean every word I've said! I've put too much into this to stop now."

Dulcie thought, "Is that a car coming?"

She decided it was the noise made by her frightened heart. She faced Rita with all the courage she could summon. She said, "Go ahead, Rita! Do whatever you like. I won't get an annulment of my marriage to Jason!"

The sound of a motor humming grew louder. Dulcie thought, "It isn't just a ringing sound in my head. There is a car coming! I'm going to jump out and try to stop them!

She didn't have to do that.

It was Tip in his old jalopy. She would have known the sound of that hopped-up motor anywhere.

Tip must have been on the outlook for Rita's car. He braked to a noisy stop and swerved the car round recklessly and came back. He jumped out and went racing over to the car. All that time, Rita sat there, like a woman made of alabaster.

Tip said, his voice unsteady, "Get out, Dulcie. Get out, quick!"

Rita drew a long, tired breath. "You're a fool, Tip!" she told him and her voice was thick with contempt. "I could have scared her into getting the annulment!"

Dulcie had scrambled out of the car. Rita made no attempt to stop her. She sat there, staring straight ahead, her face a mask of fury.

Tip muttered, "All right, Dulcie! Come *on!* Let's get going!"

Dulcie managed to cross the intervening space between Rita's swank convertible and Tip's battered old jalopy. She felt as if she had taken a beating. Her mind was numb and she couldn't realize quite what had happened.

As she got into Tip's car, her knees felt like damp cardboard.

Tip said to Rita, "I—think that Jason—knows! You'd better..." His voice broke. He stepped on the starter viciously. The car gave a protesting cough then started off.

DULCIE stole a side-glance at Tip. Tears were rolling down his cheeks. He didn't seem to realize.

"I'm glad we didn't get married, Dulcie," he said slowly. "I'd hate to have had a swell girl like you, marry a—murderer's brother!" He added, "I thought she meant to—to kill you, *too*."

Dulcie sat there, stunned with horror.

"You mean that—that *Rita*..." She could not go on.

Tip said thickly, his voice sounding as if he had a fearful cold, "Yes.

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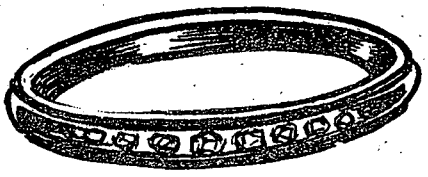
I've been afraid of it all along. When you told us you were going to marry Jason last night, I was sure!"

Dulcie's part of her mind that seized on non-essentials thought, "It *is* another day! The sun is out. It's morning."

He talked on, miserably, "If she had killed you, too, Dulcie, I think I'd have murdered her! And yet, I've loved her so long! She's done everything for me!" He gulped back a sob.

Dulcie said slowly, "Why did she want you to marry me, Tip? Why did she *sell* you the idea of marrying me?"



He seemed surprised that she didn't know the answer to that. "Why—Linna's money, of course! Rita loves money. She wanted us both to have lots of money. She tried every way she could think of to make money, and when she couldn't get ahead fast enough, she—she..."

Dulcie still did not understand. "But how could killing *Linna* bring her money?" she asked.

"Linna told her one time that she meant to leave her whole fortune to you. Rita thought Linna had done that. But it didn't really matter to her! She figured that it would be all in the family anyhow! What she didn't figure on, was your father being tapped for the murder! She left Bart's class ring there, as sort of a signpost for the cops to arrest Bart."

Dulcie was stunned with horror. "A murder just for—money!" she gasped. "Rita murdered for—money?"

Tip wiped his face, blotting away the tears from his cheeks as if he'd just realized they were there. He kept one hand firmly on the steering wheel.

"She came to hate Linna, too because she was so popular. Bart sort of fell for Linna for a while. So did I... She got jealous. It all adds up."

"But—but what will Rita *do?*" asked Dulcie shivering.

"I don't know. Run off to Mexico or someplace I hope. Before they catch up with her."

They drew up in front of Tip's house. He said, "I don't suppose you'd like to—to come into the house with me would you, Dulcie? It's a hateful place to me now. A house that—Rita built."

Dulcie said gently, "Tip dear, please don't feel so sunk. I..." She stopped. There wasn't anything to say. No way to comfort him.

She said, still sitting there in the car, "Rita told me that nobody did have any tipoff on anything. She just—bribed somebody to get Jason to meet him at the Campus."

Tip said slowly, "I'll take you to Jason, Dulcie. You can decide what you want to do. I haven't any right to urge you to marry me."

Dulcie put her arms round Tip's neck and fumbled her lips against his in a childish kiss of comfort.

"Tip dear, it wouldn't make any difference to me—about Rita I mean —if I loved you. But I've found out the difference between, well, having a crush on somebody and liking somebody and being fond of somebody, and loving somebody!"

Tip said huskily, "Are you in love with Jason Keyes, Dulcie?"

She nodded reluctantly. "I wouldn't have married him if I hadn't been in love with him, Tip," she said with newborn wisdom. "I didn't know it at the time. I thought I was just—hating him."

Tip took her in his arms and kissed her in the same hungry, needful and yet unsatisfied sort of way, that he had done on the day he came to tell Dulcie that Linna was dead.

She said gently, "You'll find somebody else, Tip. I'm not the one for you. I know you don't think so now... But you will find your girl and when you kiss her like you did me just now, you'll find the response you want, darling!"

She felt years older than Tip in that moment.

He said, stiffly, "I'll drive you

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back to your... To Jason's house." It was obvious that he could not make his voice utter the word, husband.

Chapter Eight

IT WAS ONLY when she was outside Jason's house that Dulcie thought of Nora Morse!

She said goodbye to Tip and went slowly up the steps, wondering if she dared ring the bell.

Then, as Tip drove away, she noticed something she hadn't noted before. Rita's car was parked at the back of Jason's house.

RITA'S CAR!

Dulcie's heart began to pound crazily. Rita might figure that if Jason was dead, Dulcie would, after all, marry Tip! Maybe in her madness of reasoning, she had come to kill Jason!

Dulcie grabbed the doorknob frantically, wondering how she could get into the house. To her astonishment the door opened at her touch.

Jason was in the hallway, speaking over the telephone. He put the phone down and came hurrying toward her when he glimpsed her standing in the doorway.

"Dulcie!" he gasped. "I've been phoning all over creation! Why did you disobey me and leave this house when I told you how desperately serious the consequences might be for you!"

Dulcie remembered back. She snapped, "You lied to me about Nora! She came here and ordered me out of the house. She was—impossible."

He nodded, his face grim. "Impossible is right! Rita McLean *hired* her to come and pull that stunt! Rita had detectives digging around to find out if there was any woman in my life. The only one they came up with, was Nora. Because of her habit of staying here when I was gone. Once Rita had her name, she started working on Nora." He sighed. "Nora Morse was the best secretary I ever had. And I fired her!"

He glared at Dulcie.

Dulcie traded glares with him.

"You didn't have to be so—drastic on my account," she said. "Your love life has no interest for *me!* I just hated to catch you in a lie, that's all."

Jason glared worse than ever at her. "I did not *ever* make love to Nora Morse!" he stormed. "When I found out what a low trick she pulled, I fired her."

Dulcie said cattily, "I hope she took her Nylon nightie, along with her when she went."

UNEXPECTEDLY, Jason laughed. "She did, as a matter of fact."

Dulcie remembered something else. "Rita! Was she here?" she gasped. "She's on the warpath! She did it, you know! She killed my beautiful, warm-hearted Linna. For money!"

Angry sobs choked her throat. She went on, when Jason said nothing, "She *bought* the dress shop some months ago. I suppose that's why she—she did it—then. The owner was pressing her to pay up and she stalled him along. I heard her by accident, talking to the man."

Jason looked very tired, she noticed. He seemed to have trouble finding words. "I'm afraid that is going to be hard on young McLean, Dulcie. Rita did come to me. She wanted me to defend her, when she got arrested." He sighed again. "I told her last night over the long distance phone that she was going to be arrested very soon. I thought that would—force her hand and she'd give herself away."

Dulcie asked, "Are you going to take her case, Jason?"

He shook his head. "I never accept cases when I know the prisoner committed the crime," he said sternly. "I know I've got a reputation for taking anybody's case and defending murderers. But that isn't true. I never take a case when I know the person is guilty."

Dulcie said slowly, "Then—what is Rita going to do?"

He put his arm around her. "Rita has—taken care of things in her own way, Dulcie," he said in a sad tone.

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"She was consistent to the very end."

"What do you mean?" gasped Dulcie.

He didn't look at her as he said, "She begged me to defend her and when she saw I meant what I said, she laughed. She told me, "Well anyhow, I have a double indemnity clause in my insurance! If I'm killed in an accident, Tip's future will be —pleasant!'"

"Before I could stop her, she ran out of the house. I don't know if she'd heard it coming, or not. Anyhow, it—it hit her."

"Oh," cried Dulcie sharply.

"She was dead by the time the police arrived," Jason told her, his voice unemotional.

Dulcie put her hands over her face. "Poor, poor Tip!" she whispered huskily.

Jason shook his head. "It's not Tip I'm sorry for," he told Dulcie in his old, curt way. "It's Bart. He just about worshipped Rita. And by now, he knows that she coldbloodedly left his class ring there by Linna's body. Worse than that, when suspicion pointed to your father, Dulcie, she took the ring from Tip's hiding place. Naturally, she knew all his boyish places for secreting treasures. And she sent Bart's ring to the police, again deliberately offering him up as a sacrifice. So she could get your father off and you'd inherit the money."

Dulcie asked huskily, "When will they release my father?"

Jason said tersely, "He's free now, Dulcie. I'll drive you over to your house. I was just talking to him on the phone. Of course, now he is freed from the murder charge, the house and all the money come to him."

Dulcie said slowly, "Does—does Dad know—about us?"

Jason shook his head. "And you needn't tell him, Dulcie. I'm arranging an annulment immediately!"

Dulcie said, rather crossly, "Everybody seems awfully keen on my getting an annulment of this marriage."

JASON LOOKED at her. "You *want* an annulment, don't you, Dulcie?" he asked slowly.

She said, "Yes, of course," she went on, "I want to see my Dad, right away!"

Jason nodded. "I'll get the car. I won't be a moment."

Dulcie went into the bedroom. She picked up the orchid corsage with rather unsteady fingers and pinned on the fading orchids defiantly. Then she made up her face, after combing her hair. She made a good, thorough job of it. Then she went out to Jason.

He said slowly when they were in the car, "I—I must tell you something, Dulcie." He came to a complete stop.

She said, her voice eager, "Go on! Don't stop now at the most interesting point. Tell me what you want to tell me that's so—important."

He stared straight in front of him. "Do you remember at the hotel in Reno, I got two telegrams, Dulcie?"

That seemed a million years ago to Dulcie, but with an effort she did remember and she nodded. "Yes. What about it?"

"The other wire was a long night-letter. Miss Morse forwarded it to Reno since she could see it was important."

Nora Morse again! Dulcie thought, "If he hires her again, I'll go down and—and snatch out that long hair by the handsfull!"

Jason was talking on. She pulled her attention back to what he was saying.

"The wire was from Ricky. From my kid-brother," he said, his voice uneven.

She gave him her full attention now.

"Your baby brother! That Dad flunked out of history very legitimately. Because the boy was no student!" Dulcie was tired and frustrated and cross. She didn't bother to pretty it up any, for Jason.

Jason said uneasily, "I guess I—I sort of made a mistake about Ricky. He—well the wire said he's about to star in a new Broadway hit. He

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said he'd always been crazy about the stage but that I would insist on his going to college! I...Well, one person can't live another person's life for them, and I got the wrong slant on the way Ricky acted after he left the university. I thought he'd given up and was sliding downhill. Instead, he seems to have gone clear to the top in the world of acting and make-believe!"

Dulcie said in a meditative voice, "So, like I said, your revenge sort of backfired on you, didn't it, Jason? Your spite marriage wasn't—necessary at all!"

Jason said coldly, "You're so right, Dulcie. I'm sorry. I was all out of step. Of course I'll make it up to you, by releasing you from this—mockery of a marriage immediately. And I'm handling all your father's legal affairs in connection with Estate without any payment."

Dulcie said, "I see," in a rather meek voice.

They slowed for a traffic light near a drugstore. That gave her an idea. She said, "I've got to get a cough syrup for Dad at the drugstore. He's always getting sore throats and coughs. Do you mind waiting just a minute?"

Jason said stiffly that he didn't mind.

Dulcie raced into the drugstore. She was gone more than a minute and when she came out, she didn't have the cough medicine. She fibbed when Jason questioned her about that, and told him they didn't have any in stock.

IT BROUGHT a lump to her throat to see her father in his own comfortable chair in front of the roaring fire. She saw that he looked old and tired and very sad.

She raced to him and put her arms around his neck and hugged him affectionately.

He looked at her. He said, "What pretty posies, darling. Where did you get them?"

That was the very question Dulcie had been waiting for. She thought, "Dad, you darling! You threw me that cue beautifully and I love you for it."

She drew a deep breath. "They were a gift from the groom to his bride, Dad," she said. "I—Jason and I were married last night in Reno!"

She turned around to face Jason before her father could speak. "I'm not getting an annulment of my marriage!" she gasped. "And you can't get an annulment either! I stopped at the drugstore and telephoned two newspapers and announced our wedding! I told them we were honeymooning at your cottage in the hills above Berkeley!"

Jason gasped, "But—you must hate me!"

Dulcie stood on tiptoe and put her lips temptingly close to Jason's mouth. She whispered, "I don't—*hate* you, Jason."

He caught her close in his strong arms. His lips closed down on her own, in an exultantly sort of way. "I fell in love with you, the first time I kissed you," he said between kisses. "I've been fighting it very hard, but it wasn't any use."

Professor Gilbert looked deep into the leaping flames of the fire and thought about his beautiful Linna who always would live in his heart. His thoughts went on, "Young people make love very differently from the way they did in my day. But it's just the same, fundamentally, I suppose."

He got up and tiptoed softly out of the room.

He needn't have taken such care. He might have clumped like an elephant across the floor. Jason and Dulcie wouldn't have known.

"My wife!" Jason whispered to Dulcie. "The most beautiful word in the world!"

"When it's spoken with love," Dulcie said softly, touching his face gently with her fingertips.

"I love you," said Jason huskily.

They kissed again and Dulcie knew that she no longer was an unwanted bride, married out of spite!

THE END

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The Past of Marla King

by Elaine Heyward

MARLA WAS humming gaily as she set the gate-leg table in preparation for the evening meal. She was so happy, so unbearably happy, that sometimes she was a little afraid, afraid that fate would decree that it wasn't right for anyone's heart to be so full. A small shadow crossed her mind at the thought, and for a moment she held a cup suspended in her hand. And then she laughed at herself. Oh no, surely the fates would believe that she was entitled to this happiness—after all she had gone through.

A familiar step sounded in the hall, and Marla gave herself a hasty glance in the mirror. Her dark eyes were excited, her cheeks pink. Steve's step could do this still—after six whole months of marriage!

Steve swung open the door, a lean, hard boned man, with stiff sandy hair and clean chisled features. "Hi! How's my little household drudge tonight?" He aimed his hat at a chair, missed, and took Marla hungrily in his arms.

"Quite well, thank you, Mr. Braden. And how's the famous rising young attorney?" Her tone teased him as she slipped her arms around his neck.

And then for a moment the teasing and lightness was stilled as their lips met in a long unconstrained kiss.

"Whew!" Steve slapped his hand against her soft rounded hip, "What you can do to me, Mrs. Braden!"

"And vice versa!" Marla's high colored cheeks were evidence of her answering emotion.

"Um—". Steve sniffed. "Something smells good. Hope it's as good as the news I have!"

"News?" Marla's eyes widened. "Steve, what?"

"Baby, never ask a man questions on a empty stomach. Tell you after dinner."

All during dinner Marla could feel his high excitement. She tried to make guesses in her mind—a new rich client—they were going on a trip—she was feeling as excited and pleased as he.

"Oh Steve, don't keep me in suspense any longer," she said, shoving back her desert plate.

UNUSUAL NOVELETTE

Suppose Marla told Steve the truth? But she couldn't; because a wife with a scandal in her past was a man's political suicide. And she knew what that could do to a man like Steve.

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Steve laid his napkin aside, and leaned a little across the table. "Your husband, my darling, is going to run for mayor!"

"*For mayor!* Why, darling, how—" her voice had started out excited and proud. She had been about to say how wonderful—and then, suddenly, like a beacon winking, exactly what this would mean flashed across her mind, and her lips stilled, and so did her heart, and a coldness crept over her.

But Steve in his excitement didn't notice. His voice was fired with enthusiasm. "It had never entered my mind, going into politics. But a citizens group came to me today and asked me to run against the incumbent, Elliot Taylor. They knew my stand against him, so felt I was the logical one. They figured it was high time something was done about crime conditions in the city, and Elliot has done nothing. So—"

He was going on eagerly, outlining the campaign, but Marla hardly heard. Her mind whirled in panic and fear as she looked ahead.

"Well," Steve was saying, "how does the picture look to you, darling?"

She swallowed hard. "Oh, Steve, it—it doesn't look good!"

Steve looked surprised and disappointed. "But darling—why?"

Why? How could she tell him the *real* reason? She stammered confusedly, "You're so busy now, and with another job added, I'll never see you. Oh, Steve, it will interfere with our whole life!"

"Baby, is that all? Look, nothing will interfere with our life, I promise you. So what other objection is there?"

Her mind whirled desperately for an answer. "But Elliot Taylor will fight you so desperately. "He'll stop at nothing—"

For a moment he looked at her sharply. "I have nothing to fear, Marla. My record is clean."

"Yes," her thoughts cried wildly, "your's—but not your wife's!" She pressed her hands against the table to still their trembling. "Oh Steve, I just hate politics is all. Please say you won't run!"

HE GOT UP from the table and walked to the window. Marla's chest ached from holding her breath. When he turned his face was very grim. "This is my duty, Marla, to oust Elliot, if possible, to give the citizens a clean government. So unless you can give me some good sound reason for not running—" his eyes were intent on her face.

Some good sound reason. Oh yes, she had one, but she couldn't give it to him. "I—no—I have no reason."

"Then I'm running, Marla." His voice carried quiet, firm decision.

He came to her and stooping over laid his lips against her hair. "Now stop worrying your pretty little head," he said confidently, "everything is going to be all right!"

"Of course, darling," she was never sure how she managed the bright, confident smile, "You'll make a wonderful mayor." She patted his lean hard cheek. "I'll be so proud of you!"

But the forced smile, the gayety she managed all evening was gone as she lay beside Steve later, and listened to his quiet breathing. There was within her only fright and numb helplessness as she faced her predicament—as her mind unrolled back to the root of her plight—five years ago—

She was known then as Eva King, Marla being her middle name. Trained as a commercial artist, there had been nothing available at the time, and so she'd obtained a job as secretary to Jim Swain, in the east coast town of Hobson.

Jim Swain was married, and had a family. And he also had dates with a flaming haired torch singer, Sibyl Lucas. But, his private life was his own, Marla always reflected, as long as he didn't try to push her into that private life.

And he hadn't. Never a pass. That was why Marla felt no worries when he'd asked her to come to his home one night to catch up on work. Even when he'd told her frankly that his family were away, she hadn't thought there'd be any involvement.

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She'd had a date that night, and Jim Swain had told her to keep it, to come later. And so she had gone to his home in her filmy, off-the-shoulder evening gown.

They had worked steadily until three o'clock in the morning. Then Jim had poured her a nightcap and seen her to the door. Outside she had asked a policeman to get her a cab, and gone home. It was as simple an evening as that.

Only it wasn't—not the aftermath. That was the night Sibyl Lucas was found mysteriously murdered around one o'clock. That was the night that left Marla with a bitter, sordid past!

Events piled up swiftly. Jim Swain's and Sybil's friendship came to light. Several witnesses testified Jim and Sybil had quarreled bitterly, and Jim had flung at her, "Some day I'll kill you, you little double crosser. And get this—I'm finding someone else to take your place!"

So Jim was arrested for murder. Jim was scared—and yellow. He dragged Marla into the case as his alibi. A cab driver remembered taking her to his home around eleven, the policeman remembered her leaving at three. A butler testified Jim and Marla had been in Jim's suite the entire time.

So Jim Swain had his alibi. But did anyone believe Marla had gone there to work, as she pleaded? Work, in an evening dress, and with liquor on her breath when she left? "I'm getting someone else to take your place—" Jim had told Sybil. So this girl, his secretary, was the one. And Jim, to her bitter unbelief, had let the statement go unchallenged—giving truth to something that had not existed!

The stares, the whispers, the publicity had been more than Marla could stand. She had left town, and drifting for awhile, had finally settled in Roseton, an average sized town in the west. When she applied for a job on Elliot Taylor's newspaper she had given her middle name only, Marla—Marla King.

ELLIOT TAYLOR was owner of the paper and mayor. Marla had not liked, or trusted him, but she had been very badly in need of a job. Besides it was the work she was really cut for, art—sketches of prominent people and illustrations. She loved her work. It helped shut out the bitter, angry memories.

Marla lived with Mollie Gardner, Elliot's secretary. Mollie was a swell girl except for one thing—the way she flirted with Elliot, who was a married man. It worried Marla.

But not for long, because something happened in her own private life to take up her thoughts. Steve Braden had come into it.

Elliot Taylor's bitter enemy, he had come over to the newspaper one day for a show down with Elliot over an issue. Coming out of Elliot's office, like a breath of hot angry wind, Steve had collided with Marla. At the impact, the sketches in her arms had scattered over the floor.

Steve Braden had started to brush on as if one of Elliot's stoges were of no consequence. And then he had looked at her, long and hard, with his straight-forward blue eyes, and something had sparked in their depths, something that had sent an answering flame through her.

Almost eagerly, Steve had picked up her sketches. As he handed them back, he said, "What are you doing here—working on my enemy's paper? I don't like it!"

"Why—I—" she'd begun, red cheeked.

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"Meet me tonight—at eight—the Claridge—for dinner," Steve said, and, as if it were all settled, left.

Yes, she had met him, though she had tried to argue herself out of it. And when she saw him standing there by the door, so tall and straight, and hard-boned, she knew at once why she had come. She had fallen in love at first sight with Steve Braden.

The reaction was mutual. Within a week, Steve had proposed.

"Oh, but Steve, my art work means so much to me. I don't want to give it up," she'd protested.

"You'll give it up," Steve said confidently.

Oh yes, anyday, anytime. That wasn't it—

His proposal had lifted her onto the pinnacle of happiness, and sunk her into the mire of despair. Because there was her past. Because Steve had made some remarks that frightened her—remarks about pasts.

He'd told her of his, the few college scrapes, the couple of binges. He hadn't asked for hers, but had looked at her expectantly.

She'd felt sick all over. How could she tell him, in contrast, the ugly sordidness of hers? She—she just couldn't. And she hadn't.

Once he'd said, "I'm old fashioned. I want a wife who hasn't been manhandled."

Well, she hadn't been. But would Steve believe any more than the others, in the face of all the evidence against her?

Another time he'd said, "I think an engaged couple should tell each other if there's been any—well—involvement, don't you, Marla?"

She'd opened her mouth, grateful for the chance of blessed confession, but Steve's earlier remark, "I want a wife who hasn't been manhandled," closed her lips with a terrible tightness. The chance of his disbelief—of losing him was too great.

And so she had kept silent, believing that Eva King, a secretary, could never have any connection to Marla King, an artist; believing that her past could not reach her on the other side of the continent.

With her decision to marry Steve, she had quit her job with Elliot Taylor. He had taken little notice, she was just another employee to him. But Molly Gardner's reaction had been different. She had severed their friendship over Marla's disloyalty to Elliot.

MARLA AND Steve had married. They had been so happy, leading a quiet life, with only a few well chosen friends. And it would always have stayed that way had they remained an obscure married couple. But now—

Lying in the dark, feeling the warmth of Steve's body beside her, Marla's teeth chattered uncontrolably. Now they were going to be brought out into the limelight—the worst limelight of all—an election. Elliot would fight with everything that was in him for his cherished power wielding job. When he could find nothing in Steve's past for a weapon he would turn to Steve's wife. The newspaper morgue of any large city would yield up clippings on people named King. Eva King would be identified as Marla King by those pictures the newspaper had printed with the sordid headings, "Jim Swain's illicit love—and alibi murder girl!"

Marla shivered. A wife with a scandal in her past was a man's political suicide. Elliot would hold the weapon to defeat Steve—to disgrace him.

She stifled the cry that rose to her lips. She could not, she would not let that happen. But how—how could she prevent it?

Her mind frantically sought an answer, radiating in all directions like the spokes of a wheel. But each spoke led to a weakness, a flaw. All except one. If she had no part in Steve's life—*the weapon could not be used!*

Oh no, dear God, not that, she sobbed. But what else? Suppose she told Steve the truth. Suppose, looking on the other side of the picture, away from his very probable unbelief of her innocence, his bitterness at her concealment—suppose he

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should accept her version of the story, it would mean he'd drop his candidacy to protect her, and then be forever afterward haunted by having shirked what he firmly believed was his duty. And she knew what that could do to a man like Steve.

So she dared not risk the truth. Dawn was breaking before she knew what she *had* to do. Give Steve some trumped up excuse that would contain no pitfall—and then leave him.

"Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive," the old saying beat against Marla's ears, and she strangled her sobs into the pillow.

She let a few days go by before she broke the news to Steve—days that were long and heartbreaking—that saw her moving about the gay little apartment, handling fondly and sadly the things she and Steve had chosen together—touching his pipe and robe with aching fingers. Saying good bye.

Tonight she was ready. With a calmness that betrayed nothing of her inner ache, she said to him, "Steve, I'm going back to my work. Not on Elliot's paper. But free lancing."

Steve's heavy eyebrows came up in surprise. "But Marla, you'll have your time all filled with the campaign, and then if I'm elected mayor—"

"Steve," she clutched her hands to still their trembling, "that's just it—all my time filled with things that aren't *my* life!"

"That aren't—" Steve couldn't go on for a moment. And then his mouth thinned. "Pardon my error, I had the idea your life was mine."

"It is," she wanted to cry, "every moment of every day!" Aloud she said, "I'm sorry, but, no, it isn't, Steve."

HE DID NOT answer, while incredulity, and then a terrible hurt crossed his eyes. She rushed on wildly against the pain. "I told you once, you remember, how much my work meant to me. I've found in these six months that I can't go on without it. I—I want to give it *everything* I've got. I—I—"

"All right, stop hedging—" Steve's voice was angry, "you want to give up marriage for a career, that's it, isn't it?"

Oh Steve, no, never! "Yes," she said aloud.

For a long hard moment Steve's eyes held to her face. "You're quite sure there is no other reason?"

But what other reason could she think there would be? Not his running for mayor. She had put on a convincing act of enthusiasm as soon as she had known his determination. Another man—probably? But he mustn't think that!

"No," she said with emphasis, "no

other reason. I give you my word!" She was thinking of another man on the last.

"I see," Steve said slowly, painfully. Oddly, he looked almost as if he wished she had given another reason.

His eyes moved over her face. "So all these months when I thought you were so happy," he said hardly, "you've been longing for something else. All the time your lips were responding—"

He was staring, staring fascinated at her soft red mouth, and suddenly he wrenched her against him, covering her mouth with his. Flaming, unconstrained passion of a husband for a wife was in his lips, but the passion was filled with the bitter knowledge that all ended with the kiss. No intimate gesture of pressing her arm or hip. Nothing—

When he released her, it was with an abruptness that left her swaying,

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seeking support. And then he turned on his heel, and walked into their bedroom, emerging with his pajamas and robe, and walked stiffly into the guestroom.

She stood there staring at the closed guest room door, and exactly what that closed door meant washed over her in anguished waves. She threw her hand across her mouth to stifle the heartbreaking cry that rose to her lips.

Marla moved out the next day. She moved into a small cramped furnished room, that she was lucky enough to get. Lucky? There was no such thing in her life!

She put off, though she couldn't say why, getting the divorce. She got out her drawing board and paints to take up again a work she had no heart in. But she had to make a living. She had to make good her words to Steve, that *this* was her life.

The department stores, she found, liked her work, and bought her sketches of gay, svelte women wearing the latest styles. And the bright eager faces she gave them mocked her, seeming to say, "You can paint a smile on paper, but you'll never be able to paint one on vour heart!"

No—never. And what of Steve? He had announced his candidacy, he was busy, and yet, she kept picturing his loneliness.

Only, the first time she saw Steve, he didn't look lonely. Dead tired, after delivering a portfolio of sketches, she stopped into a little cocktail bar for a pick-me-up. As she started to slide onto a stool at the bar, she saw him in a far corner at a little table, and her heart began to beat painfully.

And then she saw that he was not alone. Opposite Steve sat lovely blond Poppy Marsten. Steve's eyes were intent on her face, and, as Marla watched, he touched the girl's hand.

MARLA STUMBLED out without her drink, a knife pain of hurt through her. Had he forgotten so quickly? And Poppy Marsten, of all girls. A girl who lived by her wits.

She wasn't good for Steve, not only as a heart interest, but she could, with her madcap escapades, hurt him immeasurably in his political life. A terrible fright gripped Marla.

But by the time she reached her apartment, Marla decided that she was making a mountain out of that proverbial mole hill. A chance meeting, why, that's all there was to it, of course.

Yes, she held onto the thought desperately, even when she saw Steve a second and a third time with Poppy Marsten. But the fourth time all her fears rushed back.

And she found out that there were others who shared her consternation. A few days later she received a phone call from the manager of Steve's political campaign, asking her to come to his office.

When she was seated by his desk, he said, "I don't know why you left Steve, Mrs. Braden. That's not my business. But the fact that you *have* left him has hurt him—politically—a great deal."

"But—" Marla started in surprise, "why?"

He looked at her hard. "A substantial married man can swing a lot of votes, family votes. A man separated from his wife can lose a lot of votes—an election even."

"I'm—I'm sure your overestimating the danger," she said defensively.

"Am I? Have you read this?" He thrust a copy of Elliot Taylor's newspaper before her.

"Steve Bradens wife, we understand, has left him and is contemplating divorce. If Steve can't keep his own house in order, how can the citizens of this town expect him to keep *their* house in order? Now, Elliot Taylor is a man whose married life has been clean, unchallenged—"

Marla felt the blood drain from her face. She had not thought of this angle when she left Steve. Only of the harm her past would do.

"You asked me here for something," she said shakenly, "what is it you want me to do?"

"Go back to Steve!"

"Go—" she rose swiftly, panic gripping her. "Oh no—"

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"Listen," he said swiftly, "once Steve's elected, and proved his worth, as he will, then his private life will not be under close scrutiny as it is now. So your going back need not be permanent." He hesitated, letting that sink in, and went on, "Poppy Marsten is hardly the girl for Steve to team up with. Elliot will use that next!"

"Yes," she thought wildly, "and if I go back, it will be I—I that he uses!" She said between stiff lips, "What does Steve think of this?"

"We haven't consulted him yet," he said frankly, "but we feel Steve can be talked into it, that is if it's done soon, before he falls too completely in love with Poppy. Well?"

The room revolved around Marla. "I—you'll have to give me a little time." She stumbled blindly out the door.

In her room she paced the floor, feeling utterly, hopelessly trapped. She had left Steve so he could win an election. Now it seemed her leaving might make him lose it. She had left him because of the harm her past would do him. Now it seemed her leaving had thrown him with a girl whose unsavory present could do him harm too. So what had she gained for all her heartbreak?

And what could she do—to win Steve back the chances of election? What, more important, to break the growing heart interest between Steve and a girl who wasn't right for him? But every way she turned there was always her lurid ugly past that Elliot would seek out and use if she were a part of Steve's life.

Unless, all at once her mind stilled, unless she could uncover something on Elliot—something that she could use as a stop against his using her. Oh yes, yes, that was it! But, oh why hadn't she thought of this before—a cry rose to her lips—before she relinquished Steve?

But what—and how? No one had yet been able to get anything on Elliot in the way of pay offs and such from the underworld. There was a feeling of surety, but there was no proof. How could she hope—

She did not know. She only knew she had to find—*something!*

THE NEXT day, armed with the sort of sketches Elliot used to like, she went to his office.

"Well," he said, recognizing her, and smiling his oily smile, "I see you've left my rival. Smart girl!"

She wanted to strike out against that pleased smile, but she said quietly, "Yes. And I'm free lancing with my sketches. Would you be interested again?" She laid her drawings before him.

Elliot looked them over with interested eyes. The buzzer sounded and he took the message over the office phone. "Excuse me," he said, "I have to see some one privately. I'll step into the next office."

When he was gone, Marla's eyes darted around the office, then she tip-toed swiftly to a large cabinet. With trembling fingers she rifled it, hoping that it would divulge something—some clue to his activities. But it contained nothing but prosaic business records. But, of course, Elliot would be too clever to keep anything this open. If only, she thought wildly, she could get into that locked safe!

Elliot discussed the sketches with her, accepted them, and Marla left. Going through the outer office she noticed that Molly Gardner, her erstwhile friend, was not there. But perhaps she had stepped out for something. Marla gave it little thought.

She made a habit of going to Elliot's office often, to consult about the sketches. She never saw Molly there, and she decided she had quit her job. But she had too much on her mind to wonder.

One day she got the break she'd hoped for. Elliot's safe was open, and he left the office, briefly. Her hopes flared, and then died at the end of her stealthy search. There was nothing. Nothing!

And in the meantime Steve was seeing Poppy often, she knew that by his worried manager who kept calling her, asking for an answer, and by her own glimpses of them together. And the look of interest on Steve's clean cut face was growing when he was with the blond haired play girl. Time was short. So short. Desperation was heavy in Marla.

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One day she ran into Steve on the street. Her heart beat painfully as he drew up before her. "I've been anxiously waiting," he said stiffly, "for you to start the divorce. What's holding you up?"

Words rushed to her lips that she hadn't meant to say. "Why are you so anxious? To marry Poppy Marsten?"

He shrugged thick shoulders "Why not? Poppy's a girl who wants a home," his eyes darkened, "and would put it *first!*"

She winced, and her heart flamed in protest. But she stood there whitely, without answering, while Steve walked away, a sickness within her. Steve—Steve and Poppy Marsten!

And all her attempts to get dope on Elliot seemed hopeless. Time was slipping and she was getting no place.

Today she had taken some sketches to the suite of a department store manager in the fashionable Carlos hotel. She also had her camera to take a picture of a model, which would later appear as a sketch.

She stepped out the elevator on the sixth floor, and noticed, without interest, at the far end of the corridor, another elevator shaft. As she walked down the corridor, the second elevator came up. It was entirely enclosed, but as the elevator came abreast of the floor the occupant slid a small grill open, then closed it so quickly Marla was sure the opening was done inadvertently. But in that brief moment she had caught a glimpse of Molly Gardner.

Marla was mystified. Did Molly live here, and what kind of a job did she have to pay the Carlos prices? She felt a desire, rather than a curiosity, to see Molly and try and straighten things out between them.

After her interview she stopped at the desk and asked if Molly Gardner lived here. "No!" The clerk stammered with such a startled red face that Marla knew he was lying.

But why should he? Suddenly something clicked in her brain. Elliot Taylor owned the Carlos. It was a perfect set up for secrecy, with Elliot owning the hotel, with a private elevator. Had she stumbed onto her weapon?

But where was the entrance to that private elevator? Not from the lobby, she saw. A small dark alley ran down the back of the hotel, and there Marla found the door. Luck was with her. Someone had just entered—she could hear the elevator ascending—and had forgotten to lock the door.

SHE WAITED for a few moments, giving whoever was in the elevator time to reach the top floor and get out. Then she pressed the button, the elevator descended, and Marla was inside, going up, her heart thundering in fright and hope.

As she stepped into a small corridor, she looked around her, wondering what her next move would be. And then she saw a french door that lead onto an open terrace.

Without making a sound, she walked onto it. A large living room window confronted her, and framed in it was the most damaging picture that Marla could ever hope to find, Molly Gardner held close in Elliot Taylor's arms!

It was not until she was back on the street again, that Marla's knees suddenly gave out from beneath her, and she had to go into a rest room to sit down. Her hands ached from clutching her camera—a camera that contained several snaps—to silence Elliot Taylor!

In her apartment she developed them herself, playing fair, so that no one else's eyes would see them.

The next day she took them to Elliot's office. Apprehension made her hands wet and her knees weak. Suppose Elliot should refuse her bargain. If that happened, she was licked. Because her threat actually was a bluff. Actually she would never use Molly's picture publicly—to drag her down.

But she showed no inner turmoil as she laid the picutres before Elliot. His round florid face went deathly grey. But he was no fool. He caught on fast.

"All right," he said, "what's your

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price?" His eyes squeezed to slits, "and you know if it's too out of reason, I won't accept it!"

Yes, she knew. Anything like a demand to drop his candidacy, and he'd let the pictures go through and fight in other ways.

She leaned across his desk. "Lay off Steve Braden's private life!"

Elliot Taylor agreed with vast relief. It was obvious that he had expected a much harder bargain.

Well, she had accomplished this much, but, oh why, her heart flamed in a cry of protest—why hadn't she this security from her past before? Then she would not have had to give up Steve.

Suddenly a hope flared in her. But she did have security now—and she had the excuse to go back to Steve. Temporarily, the manager had said, but couldn't she convince Steve it had all been a mistake—couldn't she make it permanent?

She called Steve's manager and told him her decision. "Fine," he said, "but we'll have to talk Steve into this first. Come by later this afternoon."

She spent the intervening hours nervously pacing the floor. Suppose Steve should refuse, and she would lose her chance—

When she entered the office later that day, Steve was there with his manager, and she knew by the weary harrassed look on the manager's face, by the grimness on Steve's, that a stormy session had just taken place.

"Well, he has agreed—finally," the manager said.

Steve's eyes were angry. "All right, I've agreed. But nothing else except my obligation to try and lick Elliot could have made me see such a situation!"

Marla's heart twisted painfully at his words. And she knew she had been hoping—hoping that Steve would feel as she—that this was a chance for a reconciliation.

"So," Steve went on drily, "nothing can stand in the way of that aim."

The manager said, "I'll leave you alone to talk it over," and took a discreet leave.

WHEN THEY were alone, Steve faced her. "What made you agree to this?"

She wanted to cry, "My heart, Steve, that has always been yours!" But that was something she had to prove. She said, "Oh Steve, I wanted you to win. I—I'm interested in your life!"

He looked at her, while the lean tanned planes of his face set hard. "It's a little late to be interested in *my* life, isn't it?"

She stood there starkly, remembering that the reason she'd given him for leaving was to lead her life—her's—to the exclusion of his. She could not answer. Because she had no answer.

"Of course, Poppy won't like this," Steve said, "but then it's only temporary. She'll understand."

"Yes, understand that she'll be back in my life again," Steve might have said. Marla turned away to hide the sudden scalding tears. What chance did she have?

And yet, Marla knew, as she moved her things back into Steve's apartment the next day, that she wouldn't give up hope, give up fighting for a chance, until the very end.

That day the paper that was boasting for Steve carried an item that said: "Steve Braden and Marla Braden are not separated, as a rival newspaper stated. Mrs. Braden had some art work to complete, and since it was impossible to work at home due to Steve's political activities, she took a room until her work was done."

"And I'll *not* be taking that room again," Marla thought with grim determination.

She plunged into cleaning the neglected apartment. It fairly shone, when she was finished, the way it used to. She fixed dinner, all the things Steve loved, and set the table with the best china, and lighted candles. She dressed carefully, and brushed her hair to shining perfection. Oh surely, in these weeks before election, as they sat across the table, and later in front of the fire, surely there would come a moment—

At six everything was ready. But no Steve. Still he could have been

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detained by business, she argued, and set the food on the back of the stove.

Seven came, and seven thirty—and with each passing moment her hopes went lower. At eight she dumped the canapes in the garbage, and unset the table. Steve was not coming home for dinner.

Later, when she had gone to bed, to stare with aching eyes at the ceiling, she heard Steve come in and go to the guest room. Well, she had been defeated tonight, but in the morning—

The table was set, the coffee perking, when Steve came into the kitchen the next morning. He didn't look as if he'd slept much more than she.

He glanced at the table set for two, and his mouth thinned. "It isn't necessary to go into the farce of marriage to this extent, you know, Marla," he said tightly. "We may have to carry it on in public a bit, but *not* here at home!"

"Oh, but Steve, I—"

"YOU'VE been quite noble enough giving up your own life—until election," he cut in, and there was an acid sting to his words, "it wasn't in the bargain to add a domesticity you dislike, anymore," a muscle moved near his mouth, "than it was in the bargain to share a room with me. So forget it, Marla." He picked up his hat, snapping the brim with a familiar angry gesture, and left.

She stood there staring at the door. Forget it, he had said. Forget that you had hoped to show Steve that this was where your heart was. Admit that you haven't a chance of getting back into his life. No, tears ran onto the scorched toast.

Steve came home late at night, he left early in the morning. They appeared at banquets and rallies together, smiling, serene. But there were always people around them—there were never those moments alone.

And always there was Poppy Marsten in the background, her voice drifting across the wire asking for Steve, a letter in her smooth sophisticated hand in the mail. Poppy at a banquet—Steve's and her eyes meeting, exchanging something Marla could not read. Poppy waiting for the day of election, when Marla would move out.

Elliot Taylor kept to his bargain. Steve's private life was never mentioned in his campaign against his opponent. But, Marla thought bitterly, what good did it do her?

When the day of election came, Marla knew she had gained no ground. None at all. She tried to cling to the thought that when Steve was elected, because there was no doubt in her mind as to his victory, that she had, in a small way, helped him achieve his goal. But it was small comfort for her bleeding heart.

And then came the crowning, the incredible defeat. When the votes were counted, Steve was behind. By a small margin, but Elliot Taylor's machine had been too powerful. Steve had lost!

Anguished tears beat against Marla's eyes, and seeped into the core of her being. For this, she thought in despair, for a lost election—she had given up *everything!*

But her heart was more sore for Steve. As the last campaign worker left the apartment in the wee morning hours, Steve's big shoulders drooped with fatigue and frustration.

She walked over to him as he sat hunched in a chair, his cigarette forgotten in his hand.

"Steve," she said softly, "Steve—I'm sorry."

He looked up wearily. "All in the game." And then he straightened his shoulders, and tossed away his cigarette. "Well, it's over, Marla. There's no more reason to carry on this farce. You can go back to—" his mouth set, "your own life!"

Your own life. A lonely rented room without Steve and his love. Selling sketches she had no heart in. A terrible frustration burned up in her, and burst out uncontrollably in her wild cry, "My own life! Do you think that was the reason I left? Do you think—" she stopped abruptly, her face white, aghast at her words.

Steve had jumped up, all the fatigue gone from him. "What are you

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saying? What reason?" He grabbed her roughly by the shoulders, "Give me the truth, or I'll shake it out of you!"

She saw that he meant it. That there was no back tracking now. Well, she had lost Steve to Poppy, so she had nothing further to lose.

"All right, Steve." She went into her bedroom and brought out a small locked box. From it she drew the yellowed neswpaper clippings that, for some reason, she had saved all these years—clippings containing pictures of her, with the ugly headlines.

SHE DID not plead her case to Steve, but laid them, with white tense fingers before him, letting the sordid articles only tell the story.

She watched Steve's face as he read them. She had expected shock, but there was none visible. His expression did not even change.

When he had finished, he said almost as if to himself, "So this was the reason you left—" he turned to her with a little sharp hard cry, "Oh Marla, you silly baby, I knew all about your past all the time. And Elliot Taylor could never have used it!"

It was as if he had knocked the breath from her. She stared at him incredulously. "You—you—"

"I happened to have been on the west coast when this case broke," Steve explained, "and I've got a photographic memory. The minute I laid eyes on you here in Roseton, I knew you were the girl in that case!"

"You knew all those sordid details, and yet—" she couldn't go on.

Steve's eyes were intent on hers. "I believed the story *you* gave," he said simply.

He believed. Steve, out of all the world, believed. Steve—*alone*. But no—there was suddenly within her a great awakening. Because if Steve believed, there must have been others too, the real people, the understanding ones. A wondrous feeling of looking up began to fill her.

Steve caught her hands. "Oh Marla, I had hoped so that you would tell me this, so that it would not lie on your conscience as something between us. I threw out the anchor so often, but you never took it."

Yes, she saw it now in those early remarks Steve had made about pasts, in his saying when she was leaving, "Is that the *only* reason?" But how could she have known—

"When you left me—if you had only given me the real reason—then all this heartache—" Steve shook his head, "You see, I knew something damaging in Elliot's private life, and so I was prepared, as soon as I'd announced my candidacy, to present a hands off policy to him on our private lives. To stick to the real issues of the election, which, after all," Steve added, "is the only way to fight. But you left me—"

Marla felt weak, weak at each unfolded incident—that could have eliminated such heartache, if only she had told the truth to Steve in the very beginning.

"But you left me," Steve was going on, "and I thought you'd stopped loving me. I turned to Poppy Marsten in my hurt, because she was everything you weren't, and there were no reminders. But Poppy knew there was nothing—never could be anything between us."

A lightness swelled, like an opening parachute, in Marla's chest. And then closed slowly into a knot of grief.

"But Steve—you lost the election—what a disappointment—"

Steve shook his head. "No—I'm not politically minded, really, I saw my candidacy as a duty. That's been performed now, and my conscience is at rest. This too-close election will make Elliot see that unless he straightens things out that next time some one will run and defeat him."

He took a step close. Very close. His eyes were bright flames on her face. "All I want is to be private Mr. and Mrs. Braden—to face our problems, and fight them out together. All I want is—*you!*"

With a little cry she was in his arms, and their lips met in a great and hungry passion—in a long, unconstrained kiss.

THE END

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"You lied," he said, savagely. "What about you and Tom Lamarr? This time I want the truth!"

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FRONT PAGE LOVE

By RHODA HALL

Complete Novelette

Was this the way it was to be the rest of their lives? Always moving on, always being afraid of making one little slip that would betray their identity . . . and, always, Mitch not believing one word she said!

Chapter One

DRU AND Mitch were very quiet as they got out of the car and started up the walk to the house nestled high in the Hollywood hills. She was careful to keep far enough away from him so their arms wouldn't touch.

They stopped outside the door and turned to face each other. The lights were on in the house, but she didn't invite him in. He stood there looking down at her, but she kept her lashes lowered. In little more than a week she was going to marry him. She was numb and icy and afraid. She didn't love him. She was marrying Mitch to spite Tom Lamarr.

Mitch put his big hands on her shoulders, and the touch of them burned through her flesh. She shivered.

"A week is so long to wait," he said huskily. "The days seem to drag by."

Oh, no, she thought in sudden panic, they are flying by. There was no stopping them. In another week she'd be married to Mitch Randolph, and by then she'd have known him exactly three weeks. She was marrying the wrong man, but she was too numb to care. It was to be a small wedding with only a few guests. The invitations were out. They had the license. She didn't love Mitch, but she was going through with it.

But she was afraid. Mitch was head over heels in love with her, and that was all she knew about him. She had never asked him what kind of work he did or anything about himself. Perhaps he had told her about his life. If he had, she hadn't listened. She wasn't interested. Ever since the day Tom Lamarr had jilted her, she'd been dead inside.

Mitch drew her into his arms and held her tenderly. He bent his head and found her lips with his. His mouth was firm and hard and burning, but her lips remained cool and still beneath his. Her face was pale in the moonlight, and her black lash-

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es cast long shadows down her still white cheeks. Her long pale gold hair was silvery in the moonlight. She trembled in his arms.

He held her off from him and looked anxiously into her frozen face, at her closed eyes. "Dru, you do love me, don't you?"

She was numb. Her heart was a torturous ache in her breast. Tears squeezed out from beneath her long lashes. She loved Tom. She would never love anyone else.

Mitch shook her a little. "Dru, do you love me? You're so cold and distant. You've never put your arms around me and kissed me of your own free will."

She lifted her heavy lashes and looked up at the tense face so close to her own. His square chin looked strong and stubborn in the moonlight. His hair was black as charcoal, and little fires smoldered in his eyes.

Her arms tightened around the back of his neck and she drew his head down. She kissed him firmly on the lips and tried to give it something. She was surprised at the sudden throbbing inside of her. She'd thought she was beyond feeling anything.

"Now do you believe I love you?" she answered huskily.

He buried his face in her fragrant hair. "It's just that I love you so much, my dear, and sometimes I'm afraid it's all one sided. From the first moment I saw your picture on a magazine cover I fell in love with you. I bought the magazine just so I could have your picture. I wrote to the artist to find out your name, and when I learned that you were a Converse model I came to Hollywood to meet you. I'd gone to college with Bob Converse, and so I went to his office and got him to introduce us. You've been like fire in my veins from the very first. Dru, how could you help but love me when I love you so much?"

She would learn to love him, so what did it matter if she lied now? He was kind and wonderful, and she would never do anything to hurt him. Oh, why hadn't she met him first? Why did she have to fall in love with a heel like Tom?

THEY SAID good night, and she unlocked the front door with the key. It wasn't until then that she glanced around and saw the red convertible parked in the driveway under the shade of a pepper tree. It was Tom's car. Tom was inside. But he hadn't come to see her. He'd come to see her cousin Kitty.

She closed the door and with it shut out the memory of Mitch. He was easily forgotten. She stood there listening for the sound of Kitty's and Tom's voices. There were no voices. The big house was very still. There was a light coming from the open library door, just to her left, and she knew they were in there. The other rooms were dark, but there was a light in the kitchen beyond.

This was Kitty's house. Tom Lamarr was Kitty's fiance. Kitty Blaine was a famous movie actress, ten years older than Dru. She was very, very beautiful, but she had a temper that went off like a charge of dynamite on the slightest provocation.

Dru Parke had come to Hollywood from Portland, Oregon to get in pictures, and Kitty had invited her to come and live with her. She'd promised to help Dru get in pictures. But she hadn't. For weeks Dru had waited around for a call from a studio, but when nothing happened she'd grown restless and impatient.

She'd gone to Kitty's studio, and because her cousin was a famous star, Dru had been shown right into the president's office. After a brief interview he'd promised to give Dru a screen test.

That evening Kitty had stormed into Dru's room. She'd learned about Dru's visit to the studio.

"You have your nerve trying to crash pictures on my reputation," Kitty had shouted angrily.

"But you said you were going to help me get in pictures," Dru had answered nervously. She'd been only eighteen then, and it always frightened her when her famous cousin was in a temper. Usually Kitty started screaming and throwing things.

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"I won't have any relative of mine in pictures!" Kitty had stormed, putting her hands on her hips. "You'd only hurt my prestige. You're a pretty child, but you wouldn't be any good and they'd put you in B pic-

tures. I've worked hard to get where I am, and I won't have any hick from Portland messing up my career. First thing you know, they'd be putting me in B pictures too."

Tears had come into Dru's eyes.

Instantly Kitty had turned off the fireworks and changed to sweetness and sugar.

"Don't be hurt, baby," she'd said softly. "I have to look out for myself. I've been a top star for ten years, and every year it gets harder to meet the competition of bright young newcomers. I know you wouldn't do anything to make it tougher for me. But there are other things you can do. With that face and figure you can model, and I'll help you get started. I'll take you to the Converse modeling agency and tell them to give you a chance. Then after you've become a top model you won't have to do B pictures, because you'll have a name. Don't hate me, baby. Try to understand."

Nobody could hate Kitty when she pleaded like that, and Dru had smiled through her tears. She understood.

IN SIX months Dru had become a cover girl. Her long hair was spun gold, and her wide violet eyes had a wistful appeal. There was youthful innocence in the small oval face, and she had a smile that almost melted the camera lens. People bought the magazine because of the lovely, smiling girl on the cover.

Then she'd met Tom Lamarr, a famous artist. Tom had just a touch of grey at his temples, brooding eyes, and a magnetic charm. There had been many women in his life, and years ago, before Kitty had become famous, they'd nearly married. He'd started dating Dru when she was nineteen, and she'd been flattered at the attentions of an older man, a sophisticated man about town. She'd fallen in love with him.

And she'd nearly collapsed with happiness when he'd asked her to marry him. They'd been engaged for six breath-taking weeks, then one night he'd come home with her, and Kitty had been there. Instantly Dru had been aware of the tenseness between them. They hadn't met in years, but Dru had somehow known that their love for each other wasn't dead.

Tom had started breaking dates with Dru after that night, saying he was working. Then he'd jilted her. He was going to marry Kitty, he'd said.

Dru had been crushed with grief. Night after night she'd cried into her pillow.

Then one day Bob Converse had called her into his office and introduced her to a tall young man who was very tanned and had thick black hair and smoldering black eyes. He was Mitch Randolph. He'd held Dru's hand so long she'd had to pull it away. She'd known even then that he was in love with her, but she'd hardly looked at him. Men were always falling in love with the small wistful girl on the magazine covers, but she had always given them a quick brush-off. She loved Tom, and other men didn't exist for her.

Mitch had asked her out to lunch, and she'd gone with him because he was Bob Converse's friend. But she had toyed with her food listlessly, and she hadn't heard a word of what he said. He'd asked her to have dinner with him that evening and she'd gone because she was lonely. Any-

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thing was better than staying home in an empty house that was haunted with memories of Tom.

THEY'D GONE to several night clubs and had danced, but she hadn't been aware of the music, and if Mitch had wandered away from her she wouldn't have been able to recognize him again in a crowd. She'd been turning her head this way and that, trying to see if Tom and Kitty were sitting at any of the tables.

That night Mitch had asked her to marry him. He'd parked the car on a hill overlooking the lights of Hollywood, and he'd kissed her. She hadn't felt anything at all. Her lips and her heart had been dead. At first she'd refused to marry him.

"Why not?" Mitch had demanded.

"For one thing, we've just met."

"What difference does that make? It was love at first sight."

With him, maybe, but not with her.

"You're going to give in and marry me sooner or later," he'd said. "So why not now?"

She'd looked out of the car windows at the full moon riding in a starry sky, but she'd seen none of its beauty. She'd thought of Tom and Kitty's wedding, so soon to take place. Kitty had asked Dru to be a bridesmaid. How could she stand there and watch them get married without crying out when he placed the ring on Kitty's finger?

How could she stand there, knowing that people were whispering behind her back and pointing her out as the girl Tom had jilted? Everyone would be watching her to see how she took it, and they'd know she still loved Tom. She couldn't hide it.

But if Dru got married first, she could be on her honeymoon when they got married. She wouldn't have to be present at the wedding. The pain wouldn't be quite so deep then. People would say she'd certainly gotten over Tom in a hurry, and he'd be hurt. He was vain and he'd be cut to the quick if a girl got over him so soon. And Dru wanted to hurt his pride. Her heart cried out for her to crush him as he'd crushed her.

"All right, Mitch," she'd said lifelessly. "I'll marry you."

He had kissed her then, long and thoroughly, and her pulses had pounded frighteningly. She was marrying a man of deep passions.

She intended to go through with the marriage.

NOW, AT the sound of the closing door a maid hurried from the kitchen.

"Mr. Lamarr is waiting in the library to see you," she said. "Do you want me to wait up for Miss Blaine? She's working at the studio tonight."

"No, go to bed. There's no telling when she'll get home," Dru answered, staring as if hypnotized at the light coming from the library.

"Thank you, miss." The maid hurried away, and a moment later the kitchen was plunged into darkness.

Dru stood frozen to the spot. She felt as if her legs had turned to water. Tom was waiting to see her. He must have been waiting hours. Why had he come to see her?

He came and stood in the library doorway and stood looking at her a moment in silence. The light was at his back, and the silver at his temples seemed a little whiter tonight.

"Don't stand there like a frightened orphan," he said. "I won't eat you. I just want to talk to you."

She followed him into the library and turned to face him. He was standing in a glare of light from a white lamp shade, and she saw the little lines around his eyes. For the first time she wondered how old he really was. She knew he'd lied when he'd told her he was twenty-nine.

"You get more lovely every day," he said softly.

"What do you want to see me about?" she asked stiffly.

"I'm not going to let you marry Mitch Randolph."

She smiled bitterly. "What difference does it make to you whom I marry?"

"The thought of you marrying someone else drives me mad," he said. "I've made a mistake. It's you I love, Dru."

She wondered why she didn't run into his arms, sobbing happily. She

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just stood there looking at him. His face was flushed, and she knew he'd been drinking.

"Have you told Kitty?" she asked quietly.

"Not yet. But I will."

He took a step toward her, and his arms went about her. She lifted her lips to his, but there was no wild singing in her veins. The excitement he had once roused in her was gone. The whiskey was strong on his breath, and it repelled her. She thought of Mitch, of the clean spicy scent of his shaving lotion mingling with the fragrant aroma of his pipe tobacco.

And suddenly she felt sorry for Tom. He was getting old, but he was afraid to admit it and he was clinging to his youth by trying to be the great lover. He was too weak to know what real love was. With him it was vanity.

"I'll break my engagement to Kitty," he cried. "We'll elope and be married in Nevada tomorrow."

She felt only contempt for him. First he had loved Kitty, then Dru, back to Kitty, and now it was Dru again. She didn't want a man who couldn't make up his mind.

"WHAT A beautiful love scene," Kitty cried scornfully from the doorway.

Dru sprang away from Tom, and her face paled. She had never seen Kitty in such a rage. Her face was contorted with anger. She advanced on Tom in a blaze of fury.

"You heel!" she screamed. "So you're going to jilt me again! Well, you won't have the chance. I'll kill you before I'll let you make me the laughing stock of the country. I'll kill you!"

She picked up a large vase and hurled it at him. Tom ducked, and it crashed against the wall behind him.

Dru fled from the house in terror. She ran down the street until she felt a sharp pain in her side and had to slow to a walk. She was trembling. She couldn't go back to the house and face Kitty's wrath. Her only thought was to get as far away as possible. She never wanted to see Kitty or Tom again.

She came to a drug store on the corner, and on impulse went in and called Mitch's hotel.

"Dru, what is it?" he cried anxiously. "You sound frightened.

"I've got to see you right away, Mitch," she said through white lips. "Something terrible has happened."

"Are you all right, Dru? You're not hurt?"

She assured him she wasn't and told him the name of the drug store where she was calling from.

"I'll be right there," he cried, and hung up.

She waited outside for him, walking nervously up and down the sidewalk. She didn't know why she had called Mitch, or why she felt such a desperate need to see him. She knew only that the thought of him had loomed up in her mind like a protective haven.

Mitch's convertible drew up to the curb, and she jumped in beside him. He put his strong arms about her, and she clung to him, sobbing against his shoulder. And suddenly she wasn't frightened any more. She knew Mitch would protect her from anything. She dried her tears.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" he asked gently.

She didn't want to tell him about Tom Lamarr, because he might not understand. He might think she had been unfaithful to him, and then he would never believe in her again.

"I had a quarrel with Kitty," she said. It was part of the truth, at least. "It was awful."

"What did you quarrel about?" he asked. "Wasn't that Tom Lamarr's car in the driveway? Did you quarrel in front of him?"

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"No. It was after he left." She thought quickly, one lie calling for another. "She found out I'd worn one of her new gowns and torn the hem. She started throwing things, and I ran out. I'm afraid of her. I can't go back, Mitch. She'll kill me."

He laughed softly. "Kill you for ruining a gown? Aren't you being melodramatic, my dear?" He patted her shoulder. "But you don't have to go back. I have the license in my pocket. We'll find a justice of the peace and be married tonight. Then we'll go back and get your things tomorrow. We'll face the hellion together."

Yes, marriage to Mitch was the only way out. Then Kitty would get over her jealousy. They could never be friends again, but at least Kitty would know she no longer had the competition of a younger girl. She would have Tom back again.

Chapter Two

THE NEXT morning Dru woke up and looked around her at the strange surroundings, and for a moment she couldn't remember where she was. Then she remembered that she and Mitch had been married a few hours earlier, and had returned to his hotel.

He wasn't in the room, so she dressed quickly. She wanted to be looking her prettiest when he returned. She had just finished brushing her long gold hair when he came into the room. She turned toward him eagerly, and then stopped short at the sight of his grim white face. He leaned his shoulder against the door and folded his arms across his chest.

"Now suppose you tell me what really happened last night," he said stonily. "This time I want the truth."

"But I did tell you the truth," she protested.

"You lied," he said savagely. "I want to know about you and Tom Lamarr. Were you in love with him?"

She bit her lip, and she knew she couldn't start off her marriage by lying to him.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I was in love with him. He jilted me so he could marry Kitty."

Mitch's dark eyes flared angrily. "Then you weren't in love with me when you promised to marry me. You lied about that too."

Her lips trembled and tears came into her eyes. "I love you now, Mitch. I called you last night because I was in love with you. I know that now."

"I'll never believe that, not after what happened last night," he said angrily. "Why were you marrying me when you still loved Tom?"

She dropped her long lashes against her pale cheeks. "To spite him." It was little more than a whisper.

She heard him draw an angry breath. "Kitty wasn't there when you got home, was she?"

"No. Only Tom was there." Her eyes flew to his face, startled. "How did you know Kitty wasn't there?"

He moved away from the door then, and he looked suddenly weary. "We've got to get out of here," he said. "The police are looking for you."

"The police!" She fell backward a step.

Mitch came and stood beside her, towering above her. His face was white, and his dark eyes burned into hers angrily. "Maybe Tom deserved what he got. But it's not very pleasant to wake up and find myself married to a murderess. Even then it wouldn't hurt quite so much if you hadn't lied to me. It's knowing that you don't love me, that you married me just to spite another man that hurts."

Her hand flew to her throat. "Murder!" she gasped.

"I just heard it on the radio," he said, "while I was downstairs getting some tobacco. The newscaster was giving a full report on it. Tom was there when you got home last night, and a maid let you in. You sent her to bed. A few minutes later she heard you and Tom quarreling. Then it grew quiet and she heard the front door slam. A few minutes later the

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doorbell rang, and she went down to answer it.

"It was Kitty, and she'd forgotten her key. They discovered Tom's body together and called the police. He had been stabbed with a letter opener, and the police found that the fingerprints had been rubbed off the weapon. Very professional, my dear. But the police want you for murder anyway."

Dru felt the color drain from her face. "But I didn't kill him, Mitch! Kitty came in while he was kissing me, and she—"

HIS MOUTH curled contemptuously. "You'd have an even better story if you said a long arm reached in through the open window, picked the letter opener up off the desk, and stabbed him while you were looking the other way."

"Mitch, you've got to believe me!" she cried. "It was Kitty who killed him!"

"Believe you, my dear?" he said scornfully. "One of these days I'm going to start slapping you every time you lie to me. But right now I'm too tired."

She stared at him aghast. If Mitch didn't believe her, who would? There were no fingerprints on the weapon, so how could she prove her innocence? The police would never believe that Kitty had come home earlier, then had gone out and returned, pretending to forget her key. The maid hadn't heard Kitty come home the first time, because her car was in the garage for repairs and so she hadn't driven into the yard. She'd probably come home in a taxi. Dru felt trapped.

"Are you—are you going to turn me over to the police?" she asked, tight-lipped.

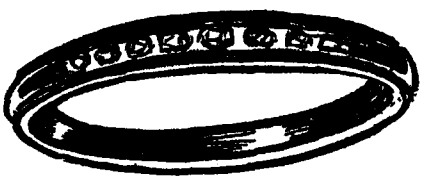
"No." His face was grim. "You're my wife, I'm sorry to say, and I'll stick by you. If the police want you they'll have to come and get you. We'll hide out as long as we can."

"But won't that get you in trouble? Isn't it against the law to hide out a—"

"Murderer." He said it for her, his voice hard as steel. "Yes, it's against the law, but I'll help you evade the police as long as I can. Go wash off your makeup. It might make you a little less pretty, and you'll attract less attention."

She did as he told her. Then he handed her a silk scarf.

"Hide every bit of your hair under this," he said. "I went out and bought it for you. Then put on these dark glasses. That should disguise you enough so we can get out of town."



They drove slowly so as not to attract attention, then when they were well out into the valley he stepped on the accelerator. At noon they stopped at a drive-in and had coffee. Neither of them had any appetite. Mitch made a purchase at a drug store. They stopped at a motel on the outskirts of a small town. She sat very still while Mitch cut off her long gold hair and gave her a short boyish bob. It wasn't a very expert job, but with a few pin curls she could give it a windblown effect.

"Can you dye your own hair?" he asked.

"I don't think so."

He dyed her hair brown, then he went out, cautioning her to remain inside until he returned. She didn't ask any questions. But the moment the door closed behind him she ran to it as if to call him back. Without Mitch by her side she was suddenly lonely and cold with terror.

Two hours later he returned with some more purchases. She clenched her hands by her sides so she wouldn't run to him and throw her arms about his neck. She longed to feel his strong, protective arms about her. She wanted to cry on his shoulder and have him comfort her tenderly.

"I sold the car to a dealer," he said. "It won't take the police long

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to discover that we're married and start watching for my license number. I bought a second hand car from another dealer and parked it down the street. The people who own this motel will get suspicious if they see us arrive in one car and leave in another."

HE STARTED unwrapping the packages. "I bought jeans for both of us, and some sun tan lotion for you to cover up that fair skin. It won't be long until my picture is in the paper too, so you'll have to dye my hair blond. I'll grow a mustache, and we'll keep that dyed too."

She put the dye on his dark hair and thick black eyebrows, then he helped her apply the sun tan lotion to her arms and her face and neck. She looked like a gypsy when they were through. They changed into jeans and bright plaid shirts, and stood looking at each other.

"We'll do," he said satisfied. "But we haven't much money, and I don't dare draw on my account. We'll have to start a new life. Our name is Farmer. I'm Albert, and you are Doris. Remember that."

"Yes," she said, repeating the names to herself.

"When anyone calls you Mrs. Farmer or Doris, you've got to answer at once. It's little things like that that can trip us up. We'll only call each other by our new names. It'll be good practice for us. We're going to travel around as itinerate workers. We'll work a week on some ranch where we won't need social security cards, collect our pay and move on. And you'll work!"

"Yes," she said. If he asked her to jump over the moon she'd do that too.

"We won't torture ourselves by listening to news reports or reading papers," he went on. "We'll put the whole thing out of our minds, and you're not to get jumpy every time you see a policeman. You never knew Tom Lamarr, understand?"

"Yes."

They waited until dark, then walked out of the motel unnoticed, taking their old clothes with them. He had bought an old jalopy that could boast little more than four wheels and a hood. They looked like itinerate workers. He turned the car off onto a dark road, and they jogged along for miles. Then he stopped the car on a lonely spot near the river, built a brush fire and burned their old clothes.

She sat in the car and looked at his silhouette against the leaping flames. He was very tall and broad shouldered, and there was character and intelligence in his hard, lean face. She began to wonder about this man she had married, and she was ashamed to think that she had known him two weeks and had never been interested enough to ask him anything about himself.

He put out the fire and scattered the ashes, then he came back to the car, and they moved on.

"You're from New York, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I know so little about you," she said.

His mouth set grimly. "I used to wonder why you never asked any of the usual questions. Now I know it was because you never thought about me at all. When you were with me you were always thinking about Tom Lamarr, and I just didn't exist for you. I don't know why you should suddenly be interested in me at this late date."

"DID YOU really come all the way out to California just because you'd seen my picture on a magazine cover?" She found it hard to believe.

"Yes. It was time I took a vacation anyway, so I drove out to make a trip of it. I made up my mind I wasn't going back without you, and I didn't know whether it was going to take me weeks or months to talk you into marriage."

"And now you're sorry you came?" she asked, and held her breath, hoping he would deny it.

He didn't answer. She stole a glance at him from beneath her long lashes and saw his jaw harden. Her

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heart sank, because it was written as plain as day on his face that he regretted their hasty marriage.

"I—I'm glad you came," she murmured.

"You should be!" he flung at her cuttingly. "If it weren't for me you'd be on your way to prison. Something tells me you're going to knock yourself out trying to enslave me with your charms from now on."

"Not because you're helping me escape!" she cried, cut to the quick. "Because I love you."

"Oh, cut it!" he cried bitterly. "It's a little late for that now. I wouldn't believe you loved me if you swore to it on a stack of Bibles. I'll never again believe anything you say."

If he'd slapped her it couldn't have hurt as much. She knew she'd killed his love for her, and tears filled her eyes.

"What kind of work did you do?" she asked after a moment.

"I'm a radio actor."

She batted the tears from her eyes and stared out of the car window. He'd given up his career because he was the sort of man who would be loyal to the girl he'd married. How he must hate her!

The next day they stopped at a ranch and were put to work in a field, pulling onions along with several other workers. By afternoon Dru's back felt as if a redhot knife was cutting it in two. Her eyes smarted from the glare of the hot sun, and she was sure her small nose was blistered. The other workers moved down the long rows with the speed of lightning. She tried to keep up with them, but by noon she was trailing several rows behind. At quitting time she and Mitch were paid off because she was too slow. They got in the car and covered some more miles.

Twice that week they found other jobs picking peaches in orchards, but each time they were fired at the end of the day. And each day they covered a few more miles. By the end of the week she no longer needed the suntan lotion. Her fair skin changed slowly from beet red to tan, and there were cuts and scratches on her soft hands.

One evening they pulled up at a country station for gas, and the attendant said, "Well, they haven't got them yet."

"Who?" Mitch asked.

"That model and the guy she married. If you ask me, they bumped Lamarr off together. But what gets me, is how a good looking dame like that could disappear. Even if she dyed her hair red, you still couldn't help but spot a classy babe like that. There's a reward for her capture, too."

"A reward?" Dru gasped.

Mitch nudged her warningly.

"Yeah. Kitty Blaine has offered a thousand dollars reward to anyone who turns the girl in. I guess she's taking it pretty hard. She was engaged to marry the guy, you know."

"No, I didn't," Mitch said. "We never have the money to spend for a paper."

"I'll show you their pictures. Maybe you'll run into them somewhere along the road. I guess you can use that thousand dollars as well as the next one."

HE TOOK a newspaper out of his pocket and held their pictures before their eyes.

"Pretty girl," Mitch said. "But give me a brunette any day."

"You can have the girls," the attendant laughed. "Just give me the thousand dollars."

When they were under way again, Dru said hysterically, "A thousand dollars reward! Oh, Mitch, everyone will be on the lookout for us now. Someone is sure to recognize me."

"Recognize you?" he asked. "Why, Mrs. Farmer, since when do you have friends like Kitty Blaine and Tom Lamarr? Did you meet them picking peaches?" But he looked worried.

They were in Nevada now. They hadn't worked for three days, and their money was dwindling rapidly. At every ranch they came to Mitch stopped and asked for work. Finally, a man named Walsh invited them in so he and his wife could interview them.

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The Walshes were looking for a hired man who had a wife to help with the housework. Mitch and Dru assured them they were hard workers, and they got the job. There was a small cabin on the back of the land where they were to live, and Mr. Walsh led them to it.

He left them with a warning to be up at five in the morning, and they stood looking around at their miserable surroundings. The cabin had only the barest furnishings. There were holes in the oilcloth on the table, and no rugs on the floors. The walls of both rooms were papered with pictures from magazines and newspapers, some of them yellow and cracked with age. She saw a recent one of herself and went over to tear it down.

"Leave it there," Mitch said sharply. He went in and threw himself down on the old iron bedstead, and the springs creaked rustily beneath his weight. "Call me when supper is ready," he said.

Dru looked around her helplessly. She had never cooked a meal in her life, but she knew she was going to have to learn. She shoved wood into the rusty cook stove, and after a few minutes got the fire to burning. She set the table and made coffee in an old-fashioned enamel pot and fried bacon and eggs and hash brown potatoes. Then she called Mitch.

The handle of the coffee pot was almost as hot as the stove lids, and she gave a sharp cry of pain as she pulled her hand away.

"Did you burn yourself?" Mitch asked.

He held her injured hand and gently rubbed lard on the palm. His head was bent, and he was so close she could have leaned forward and kissed his cheek. He was so near, and yet so far away. Tears came to Dru's eyes. She wanted to reach out and touch his hair, but she didn't dare.

He had never kissed her since the day they had fled the hotel. He spoke to her only when necessary, and his voice was always harsh. When he looked at her his eyes were always hard and cold as steel. If only she could be sure that he still loved her. If he would just take her in his arms once in a while, she wouldn't mind the back-breaking work, the miserable way they lived. It was the fear that she had lost his love forever that was breaking her down day by day.

"Okay," he said, dropping her hand. "Let's eat."

She sat down across the table from him and toyed with her food. She had no appetite these days.

"I think we'd better stay here a couple of weeks," he said, not bothering to glance up at her. "We need the money, and it may be some time after we leave here before we find another job. No one is going to see us here on the farm, and we're probably safer than on the highway."

She sat looking at his grim face, and she wondered if she would ever again see it soften with tenderness when he looked at her. He glanced up and saw her watching him. Their eyes held for a long moment, then his jaw hardened.

"It isn't necessary to make cow eyes at me," he said coldly. "I'm sticking by you because you're my wife, and for no other reason."

She jumped up and ran into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

"Stop acting childish," he called after her. "Come back and eat your supper."

She threw herself across the hard bed and began sobbing heart-brokenly. But even her tears didn't move him. After a while she heard him washing the dishes.

Chapter Three

THE NEXT morning they were up at dawn, and by nine o'clock Dru had done a full day's work, but the day had only begun. Her back ached, and she thought she would drop with weariness. But she didn't let her aching body slacken its pace even for a moment. She couldn't let Mitch down.

At eleven o'clock she was down on her knees scrubbing the kitchen floor when the Walsh's son came

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downstairs for breakfast. He was Dru's own age, and she took a dislike to him at once.

"What a pretty girl," he said, lounging in the doorway. "You brighten things up around this lousy farm."

She ignored him and went on with her scrubbing. But he wouldn't take the hint and go away. He said his name was Billy and that he had been attending an art school in Los Angeles. He was studying to be a magazine illustrator.

"I'd like to sketch you some time," he said.

"No."

"Why not? Girls like to have their pictures painted."

"I wouldn't make a very good model. I couldn't sit still."

"You'd make a wonderful subject. Your features are perfect."

She didn't answer.

"I've painted a lot of famous models," he said calmly. "I've even painted Dru Parke."

She looked up at him in open-mouthed amazement. "You what?" she gasped.

"Sure." He smiled cockily. "She was one of my favorite models."

Well, of all the nerve! she thought angrily. To say a thing like that right to her face!

She turned her back on him and did a corner over a second time so he couldn't see the hot flush on her cheeks. If she wasn't careful she'd be making one of those little slips Mitch was always warning her about. Oh, why didn't he go away and leave her alone?

But he stayed close to her side all day. She didn't talk to him any more than was absolutely necessary, but she was afraid to be openly rude to him for fear he would have her fired. He was an only child, and she didn't need anyone to tell her that he was terribly spoiled.

He followed her out to the chicken yard, but he didn't offer to carry the pail of grain for her. He was home on vacation, and it was plain that he wouldn't help around the farm for fear of getting callouses on his sensitive fingers. Once when she was flinging out the grain, he caught her hand and looked at it, turning it over and touching the palm.

"What soft, slim hands," he said admiringly. "Not a callous on them. I'd like to sketch them paring a red apple. You've never done housework before, have you?"

She pulled her hand away uneasily. "My husband doesn't let me work very often."

"You're newly married, aren't you?"

"Yes. No. Well, not exactly. We've been married a year." It would never do to let anyone know they'd only been married a week. It might arouse suspicions. Oh, why didn't he leave her alone? Questions. Questions.

She glanced up and saw Mitch scowling at them from the barn doorway.

"Please go away," she said worriedly. "You're making my husband jealous."

SHE CAUGHT her breath and looked at Mitch more closely. Jealous! If only she could make him jealous. Perhaps a little competition was all he needed to make him care for her again. She turned and fluttered her long lashes at Billy, giving him one of her melting smiles.

"Would you really like to sketch me?" she asked.

"That's a silly question. Haven't I been begging you to pose for me all afternoon?"

He had to paint her outdoors, she decided quickly, so Mitch would see them together for long hours.

"But when could you do it?" she asked. "I haven't any time to pose."

"You have all the time in the world," he answered cockily. "I'll just tell my mother she's hired a model for me, not a hired girl."

"When can we begin? Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow morning at nine," he said. "I'll get up early." He went away then and left her alone with her work for the rest of the day.

That evening Mitch sternly told her to keep away from Billy.

"We aren't making friends with anyone," he said sharply. "Friends ask too many questions, and you're

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not experienced enough at this sort of thing to keep your answers straight."

She turned away from him to hide the happy shine in her eyes. He was jealous already.

The next day Billy set up his easel on the front lawn, and she posed most of the afternoon while he made several crayon sketches. From the corner of her eye she saw that Mitch was making excuses to keep walking past them, and then he would frown at her. She was singing inside. Her little plan was working. Mitch was burning with jealousy.

"I'll start an oil portrait of you tomorrow," Billy said, gathering up the sketches to go in the house. "You must be stiff from sitting so long."

"No. I know how to relax while I'm posing." Instantly she could have bitten off her tongue, but Billy hadn't noticed the slip she'd made. He was staring happily down at one of his sketches. When she asked to see them, he refused, saying they weren't good enough.

When she got back to the cabin Mitch was waiting for her. His black eyes burned into hers angrily.

"You shouldn't have posed for him," he said sternly. "Maybe the kid isn't a good artist, but now he has your picture. It's only a matter of time until he compares it with your picture in the paper, then you're sunk."

She felt sick. "I didn't think of that!" she cried.

"You never think," he answered coldly. "We've got to get out of here. First thing tomorrow morning we'll collect our pay and be gone before he gets up."

Was this the way it was to be the rest of their lives? she wondered wearily. Always moving on. Never having enough money. Working like slaves and living in miserable dwellings. Always being afraid of making that one little slip that would betray their identity. Running. Running. Running.

"I'll start the fire," Mitch said. "You can peel the potatoes."

He picked up a stick of kindling wood, and she saw him wince as he stopped to remove a splinter from his finger. Then she saw his hands. The blisters had broken, and the flesh on his palms was raw. She felt as if a knife had turned in her heart. She had done this to him. With a little sob she took his hand and pressed the palm to her cheek.

"Oh, Mitch darling, your poor hands," she cried, tears in her eyes.

HE CRUSHED her to him and kissed her hair, her eyes, her lips. She clung to him, weeping softly.

"Dru, you do love me!" he cried huskily.

"Oh, yes! I only flirted with Billy to make you jealous."

"You little fool. How could you make me any more jealous than I already am? I've been nearly out of my mind with wanting to hold you in my arms, but I didn't want a girl who had to force herself to endure my kisses."

Over the supper table they made more plans. "We'll have to get rid of the jalopy," he said. "By now the police will be watching for it. And we'll have to change our pattern of living. If that kid recognizes your picture, he'll tip off the police and they'll alert all the ranchers and farmers to be on the lookout for us. We'll have to take new names and we'll both dye our hair red."

They'd soon run out of colors to dye their hair, she thought woodenly. Soon they'd have changed their names so often that she'd get mixed up and sign her name as Mrs. Farmer when it was supposed to be Mrs. Jones.

"We'll go to a big city, and maybe we can hire out as butler and maid to some family. That's the only kind of work we can do where we don't need social security cards."

When they had finished their simple meal she started to stack the dishes.

"I'll wash them," he said. "You go to bed and get some sleep. We don't know how long it will be before we get another night's rest with a roof over our heads. The money we get for this job won't get us very far, and we don't dare to try and sell the car. It's registered under my right

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name, and by now Mitch Randolph is as famous a name as Al Capone."

She went in and lay down on the hard bed, not bothering to undress, but she couldn't sleep. After a while Mitch called to her and told her he was going outside to smoke his pipe a while. She heard the door close behind him, and the sound gave her a hollow feeling of loneliness. Suppose some day he got tired of living this miserable existence and walked out the door just like that, never to return? But she mustn't torture herself with thoughts like that.

She stared at the ceiling. When he returned she would have a long talk with him and tell him exactly what had happened that black night. Perhaps now she could make him believe that Kitty had come into the room while Tom was kissing her. Dru clenched her hands. She had to make him believe her!

He was gone so long she began to grow uneasy. After a while she got up to go and look for him. The light was on in the kitchen, and her face blanched when she caught sight of the note propped up against the sugar bowl. She picked it up with shaking hands, but she knew he had walked out on her even before she read it.

"I know it's a dirty trick to walk out on you this way," he had written, "but it's easier than saying goodbye. I love you, but we can't go on this way. At least, I can't. You've got the idea now, and you'll get along all right on your own. Just remember everything I've taught you. Don't make friends, and don't read the newspapers. Get yourself lost in a big city. In a few months they'll have stopped looking for you, and you can begin using your own name again and find better jobs. Don't do anything foolish like giving yourself up.

Love,
Mitch.

SHE SAT down at the table and put her head down on her arms sobbing heartbrokenly. She might as well give herself up now. She couldn't go on without Mitch.

There was a loud knock on the door, and she wiped the tears from her eyes before she went to answer it. Billy was standing there, and with him was a fat man wearing a sheriff's badge.

"It's her all right," the sheriff said. "Where's your husband?"

"He's gone," Dru said through stiff lips.

The two of them stepped into the cabin, and Billy rushed over to search the bedroom. The sheriff drew his gun, and Dru had a hysterical desire to laugh. Was he afraid of her?

"He's not in there," Billy said, coming back to them. He stood leering at Dru, and she wanted to slap his smug face. "You didn't believe me when I said I'd painted you before, did you? Well, I did. I used to copy your picture from magazine covers for practice. The moment I saw you I noticed the resemblance, but I thought it was only coincidence. I didn't think Dru Parke would be riding around the country in a jalopy, doing housework. I thought she'd be holed up in some swanky hotel somewhere. But when I did those crayon sketches of you I gave you blond hair, then I took them to the sheriff. Pretty smart, huh?"

She walked out of the door ahead of them. It didn't matter any more. Nothing mattered now that Mitch had deserted her. She was glad it was all over.

The sheriff pushed her into his office ahead of him, Billy following close at their heels. A deputy was on the telephone.

"I'm calling the Los Angeles police, sheriff, to tell them we've captured both of them," he said.

Dru's face went white when she saw Mitch rise from a chair by the deputy's desk. His hands were handcuffed.

"I'd hoped to keep you out of this, Dru," he said softly, his mouth twisting. "I hitched a ride into town and gave myself up. I couldn't bear

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to have you go on living that kind of life."

Her violet eyes grew enormous in her white face, and suddenly she understood the note he'd left her. He hadn't wanted her to read the papers, because then she'd find out he'd confessed to keep her from going to prison, and of course she'd never let him do that. When he'd written that she could start using her own name again in a few months, he'd meant the case would be closed by then. He'd be in the penitentiary.

Tears flooded her eyes. "Oh, Mitch, you can't do this!" she sobbed. "I'll never let you go to prison for a crime Kitty committed." Then with tears rolling down her cheeks, she told him exactly what had happened that night. His eyes looked deep into hers while she talked. "You've got to believe that!" she cried, when she had finished her recital. "It's the truth."

"I believe you," he said quietly. His face had drained of color. "But you'll never make a jury believe it."

"Nor us," Billy said smugly.

THE DEPUTY replaced the receiver, and there was an odd look on his face. "It's true," he said. "The Los Angeles police said to turn both of them loose."

Billy's face dropped a foot. "You mean I don't get the reward?"

"That's right," the deputy said, unlocking Mitch's handcuffs. "Kitty Blaine confessed."

"She would never confess," Dru cried.

"She didn't have any choice. They had too much evidence against her. While the search was on for Dru, a detective was working on the case from another angle. It seems that while Kitty was having hysterics that night, he went through her purse and found the key to the front door. That made him suspect that she'd rung the front doorbell so she could establish an alibi for herself when the maid let her in.

"Kitty said she'd come home in a taxi, but they combed the city and couldn't find any driver who'd taken her home. Finally an actor admitted he'd given her a lift home from the studio that night. He said he sat in the car and waited until she unlocked the front door and went inside before he drove away. Then the maid broke down and said it was Kitty she'd heard quarreling with Lamarr that night. She hid at the top of the stairs and listened. She'd seen Miss Parke run out when the quarrel began, but she thought it was her duty to be loyal to her employer, so she lied."

"Poor, beautiful Kitty," Dru said sadly.

"Don't waste your sympathy on her," Mitch said. "She'll charm the jury into believing she is just a sweet, innocent little thing who was getting pushed around."

An hour later they were jogging down the road in their old jalopy. Mitch pulled off to the side of the road and gave Dru a long, long kiss.

"Shall we go to New York or buy a little farm out here?" he asked.

She made a wry face. "Don't ever mention the word farm to me again," she said, and they both laughed.

THE END

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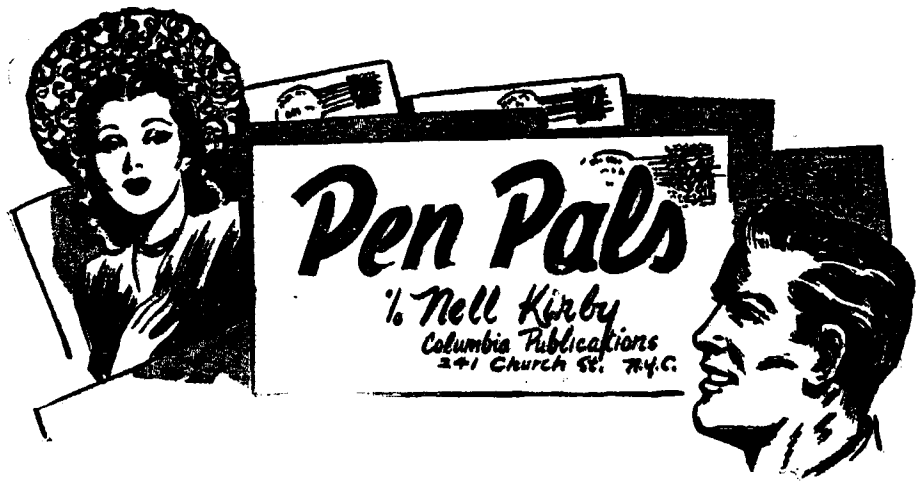

WELCOME PEN PALS!

NELL KIRBY wants all our readers to have an exciting adventure, and, making new friends is exciting and stimulating. You'll find pals who share your own particular interest and hobbies, and who will bring distant parts of the country as close to you as the note of paper held in your hand.

In order for you to receive your mail direct, we will print your full name and address. Address letters,

Pen Pals
Columbia Publications c/o Nell Kirby
241 Church St.
New York. 13. N. Y.

My name is Violette Carey. I'm nineteen years of age and single. Have blonde hair and blue eyes. Am five ft. four and one half inches tall and weigh one hundred pounds. I am very shy. I love music, dancing, reading, movies and like to go out car riding and play records.
Would enjoy hearing from males or females, from 20 to 25 years of age. I will answer all letters I receive and would enjoy exchanging snapshots with everyone interested in corresponding with me.
Violette Carey, 79 Grove St., Waterville, Maine

I am a lonely boy of nineteen, and would like very much to receive letters from boys and girls from all over. I will answer all letters. I like all sports, especially basketball.
I come from Beloit Wisconsin, originally, and I am attending radio operator's school here at Keesler. Please write to me.
Pfc. Donald L. Riechard, AF-27931071, 3392 Trng. Squdn. Box 333, Keesler Air Field Base Biloxi, Mississippi

I would be very happy to have lots of pen pals from everywhere; young or old, boys, girls, men or women. Anyone in the service of our Country is especially welcome. I am forty three years old and the mother of eleven children. I live in the country and get very lonesome.
My favorite hobby is crocheting. I like sewing and collecting old crochet hooks. I also enjoy the radio, scrapbooks, snapshots and picture post cards.
I am five ft. five and one half in. tall and weigh 125 pounds. Have blue eyes, fair complexion and dark brown naturally curly hair, cut short. There is some grey in my hair, which I don't mind. I love new friends and hope my mailbox will be filled up with letters from everywhere.
Mrs. Estella Knight, Route 2, Maplesville, Alabama.

I'd like to have pen pals. My name is Vilma Iselin. I am sixteen years old and live in Central America. I would like to exchange letters with girls and boys of all ages.
Vilma Iselin, 4a. Avenida Norte No. 13, Guatemala City, C. A.

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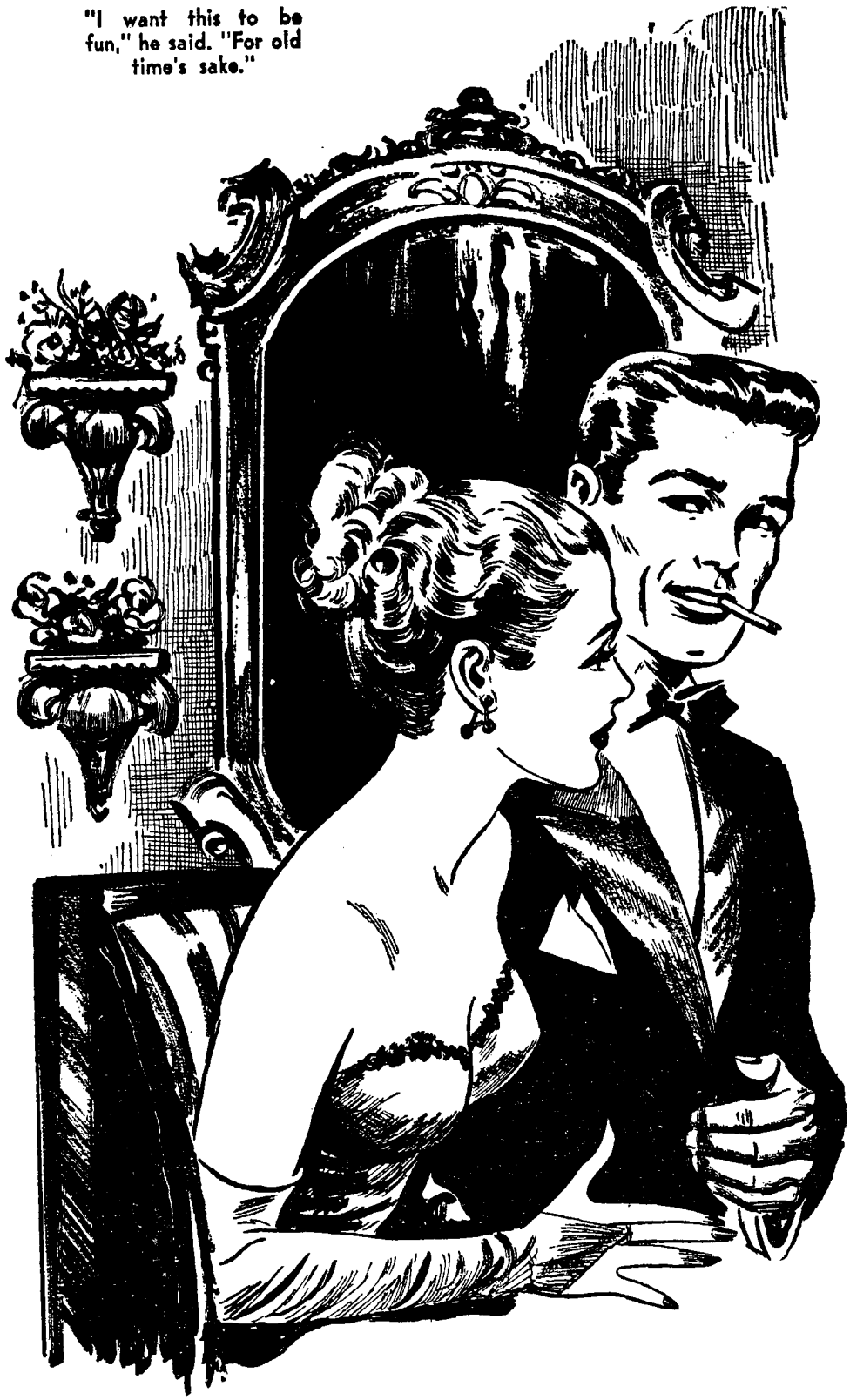
"I want this to be fun," he said. "For old time's sake."



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Her Shadow On The Sun

By MARION P. WILSON

GLENNA STEVENS sat on an elaborately carved black bench in Neal Brentley's exclusive Laguna Beach Gift Shop, waiting for him to propose to her ! She had a definite feeling it would be today.

Her mouth curved in a soft smile. A fantastic spot for an offer of marriage! And equally fantastic that she should be here! Neal was serving a customer now; in a few minutes he would come to her. How different I am now, mused Glenna, from the hurt, crushed girl of five months ago! She was almost whole and alive again, almost free from the bondage of her unhappy love for Kurt Anders.

She owed so much of her recovery to Neal. There was no-one quite like him. He was kind and thoughtful, upright and fine. Everything that Kurt was not. Yes, she reminded herself gratefully, she was holding her head high this very minute because of Neal's healing devotion. The devotion was changing into love now, and soon they would build a good strong life together.

Five months ago she had driven her car down from San Francisco in a wild flight from sight and sound of Kurt. She was sure, then, of only one thing: with all the determination and courage she had left, she would forge a new life in fresh surroundings. Her sister Alice, with whom she shared an apartment, had been sworn into secrecy, as was her boss at the Bank, where she worked as a secretary. He had secured her a job at a branch Bank in Laguna Beach, making the transfer arrangements. Yes, she had staged a successful run-out, forsaking the familiar scenes of San Francisco, turning to the color and charm that was Laguna's.

It had been a bitter struggle. Glenna's heart was bruised and aching, but she fought to blank out the dark image of Kurt. She plunged into her job, and for the first month at the Beach she learned to live a day at a time, doing well what lay before her. Each day she grew stronger.

And then she met Neal. Their casual friendship, born in the Gift Shop, developed into something fine and sturdy. Unconsciously she drew on Neal's strength to develop her own. She needed much to put down the cruel memories of Kurt. She had told Neal nothing of the reason behind her wild drive down the coast; it lay buried in the dead past.

Now he was nodding the customer

Tonight, when she could talk alone with Neal, everything would be as before, sane and safe and good. But Glenna was uneasy at Neal, he was acting so strangely.

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out. On the black bench, Glenna straightened. Her hair was molasses-brown with gold glints. Glenna's eyes were a smouldering, velvety fire in the whiteness of her face. She looked up now as Neal stood before her.

He was smiling the slow, engaging smile that made him almost handsome. He sat down beside her and took her slim hands in his. "Glenna, I'm the world's worst amateur at speeches like this," he said earnestly, "but here goes! I love you and I want you to marry me! I'm not good enough for you, but then no man could measure up to that!" He paused to draw a deep breath, then chuckled. "But, m'lady, I'll have you know I'm moderately successful, being sole owner of three Gift Shops, all exclusive! No ordinary gee-gaws for the Brentley Shops! Only the choicest of choice baubles!" Abruptly he sobered. "Glenna, will you marry me?"

HER BROWN eyes looked into his black ones, as if in their depths she would fine the answer to all life's puzzles. "Yes," she said softly, "I will!" A quick smile curved her lips. "And it isn't because of expensive baubles, either! Or because you're a self-made man! Or just because your hair is curly!" She stopped short. She was on the point of saying: "It's because I love you!" But she couldn't say it. Not quite yet. She needed a little more sunshine, a little more of Neal's kindness and love before she could say that.

Very softly she murmured, "Neal, you're the grandest man a girl could marry! His strong hands tightened on hers and he leaned to kiss her tenderly, lingeringly....

They heard the shop door opening and Glenna hastily drew out of his embrace. "I'll wait in the alcove," she said, and turned quickly to the rear of the shop. She was almost grateful for the customer's interruption. Her mind was whirling with a strange mixture of conflicting emotions. In the curtained cubby-hole she sank into a chair and closed her eyes. How fine Neal is! she thought. And how certain I am of his love!

Only last week he had said, so seriously, "I want to be very positive when I marry! There must be no mistakes! My Dad's life taught me that lesson. He was wrong twice in the women he chose. My Mother left him when I was very young, and then Dad married again. It was a failure, too, and he was forced to divorce a second time. I grew up in this unhappiness and vowed, when it was my turn, I'd be extra careful!" It was then she had wrestled with the problem of telling him about Kurt. But surely no good could come from it. It was like an illness she was convalescing from, and the illness itself was no part of the new Glenna. But the Glenna of San Francisco, she reflected bitterly, that was a different thing!

She had fled the wild turbulence of Kurt, the darkly handsome man himself, and his effect on her. He was independently wealthy, dominating, and used to things going his way. Glenna had loved him hopelessly, but Kurt was only playing and he made this quite clear. No strings attached to Kurt Anders, ever!

Suddenly she found herself listening intently to the voices in the shop. A cold, nameless fear struck across her heart. For some time she had been aware of the murmur of voices, but now she heard the words distinctly. One voice was Neal's. But it was the customer's voice that almost panicked Glenna. It was the voice of Kurt Anders.

But, she reasoned hopelessly, it couldn't be! It mustn't be! Undeniably it was!

In a frenzy, she wanted to run. But there was no escape! Kurt was saying suavely, "The gift is for a very special girl! It must be just right!" Glenna waited for Neal's reply, and when it came, the friendly courtesy of his voice tore at her. "The jade dinner ring is exceptional. It's one of my finest pieces." Neal was hesitating about something; she was conscious of a tiny pause. Then, "But wait! There's a young lady right here who can give us the feminine reaction!" Pridefully, confidently, he called, "Glenna!"

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Her blood froze. Impossible to step out of the alcove, yet she had no choice. She was never to know how she did it, but there she was, in the big shop, facing the two men! Suffocating anger at Kurt burned in her cheeks. She trembled like a reed blown by a merciless gale.

Kurt stared in astonishment, rooted. Neal said courteously, "This is Miss Stevens...." He got no farther.

Kurt found his voice just then. "No need for introductions! This is the very special girl the gift is for!"

THE SILENCE was dreadful; it hung like a black pall around the three. Glenna moved close to Neal. She sensed his tenseness—he was taut as a drawn wire, his eyes over-bright. She said the first thing that came to her lips: "When did you get in?"

Kurt smiled the quick, charming smile Glenna knew so well. "An hour ago." He was examining her thoroughly and appreciatively. "I browbeat your sister Alice into telling me where you were!" he went on evenly. "And here I am!"

Yes, here you are, she thought in anguish. Her heart was pounding wildly and she was conscious of the coldness of her hands. She forced herself to say, distinctly, "Kurt, this is my fiancee, Neal Brentley! We've just become engaged!"

It was Kurt's turn, now. He took it well; only his eyes betrayed him. They flicked and narrowed. "Well," he said with careful precision, "this is a surprise!" Only Kurt could handle such a difficult situation without forfeiting poise. "Congratulations, both of you!" He turned to Neal. "I'll take the jade ring, Brentley! It will be my wedding gift!" He paused slightly, as if considering. Then, "Let me give you a celebration party tonight!"

Glenna caught her breath. Surely, now, Neal would protest. He must decline—she couldn't go on with this. Instead, with calm deliberation, he was placing the ring in its Chinese box. "Good idea," he said, calmly. "We'd like that, wouldn't we, Glenna?"

Through stiff lips she said, "Yes!" She wanted to cry wildly, No, No! This mustn't happen! But she stood like a frosted image of a girl, watching the two men transact the business of the ring.

"The Manzanita's a good spot!" Neal said casually. "I'll pick you both up around nine." He handed the wrapped ring to Kurt.

"Good enough! I'm at the Hotel, of course." He turned to Glenna and took her arm. "I'll take you now, wherever you're going!"

She hesitated and looked at Neal beseechingly. Surely, now, he would come to her rescue with a protest! "Run along, Glenna!" His eyes revealed nothing. She felt as if Neal were a stranger. "I'll see you both later."

Going out the shop, she caught herself silently counting the steps. She wanted to run back to Neal; instead she was following Kurt out the door, like a puppet on a string. She had to be civilized, didn't she?

But once outside she was angry. She wasn't going to allow Kurt to ride roughshod over her again! She looked at him stormily. "Why did you come here?"

"To see you," he answered with maddening self-possession. "It's as simple as that. I'm impulsive!"

"But Neal and I...."

"Oh I won't ruffle the love nest," he interrupted mockingly. "I'll stay a few days, then be on my way."

"Be sure you do go, Kurt." She could speak levelly, now.

When they reached her apartment he gave her the ring. "It's my wedding gift!" She wanted to refuse it, but that would be school-girlish, so she accepted the tiny box. She wanted to refuse tonight's party, but that wouldn't do either. Neal wanted to go.

Quickly he turned and was off down the street. "See you this evening, beautiful," he called. "Wear your best bib n'tucker!"

THE BEST bib n'tucker was cinnamon moire, exactly matching

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the color of her eyes. Her bracelets were wide gold bands. In the mirror she studied the reflection with satisfaction. She had had time to think sanely. The first shock of encountering Kurt had left her weak and uncertain; she hadn't thought he could still effect her so strongly. But now she had a firm check on her emotions. She would match his air of gay casualness. She would be matter-of-fact, too. Kurt mustn't hurt her again, ever.

Tonight, when she could talk alone with Neal, everything would be as before—sane and safe and good. But she felt uneasy about Neal. He had acted so strangely in the shop, wanting to go to the Manzanita! But that was probably because he was confused and shocked, too. And no wonder! How he must be suffering right now! His faith in her was shaken....Neal, who had felt his judgment of her so sure and so right! Neal, who was afraid of making a mistake in the girl he loved! His Father's errors had made him extra carful. And now this.... But tonight she would put everything straight. He must have faith in her again.

It was time for him. Hastily she slipped into her evening coat. She would be outside when he drove up; then she could talk to him before they called for Kurt.

But the first voice she heard was Kurt's. "See you're on time, as usual," he called gaily. So Neal had picked him up first! Why? She felt hurt and let-down, but she wasn't going to show it! Neal helped her into the car with his usual courtesy. Just to her, he said, "You look pretty grand tonight, Glenna!" But something was lacking. His voice wasn't warm and eager. His face revealed little more than ordinary pleasantness. Suddenly the warm night seemed unfriendly, and Glenna shivered a little.

The Manzanita was a Spanish-style night spot on the coast highway. Its low-raftered room had a slumberous atmosphere. Its lights were dim. In the dimness, the bright Spanish reds and greens and yellows of the decor were soft and muted. As they entered, the five musicians struck up a gay, provocative folk song. Instantly Kurt took over. He selected the best table, ordered drinks, saw that everything was just right. As always, Kurt was a marvellous host. He was sure of himself; he was animated to just the right degree. The role was flattering to him, and he knew it. How compelling are his dark, good looks, Glenna thought, in this Latin atmosphere! Yes, anyone could feel Kurt's magnetic personality here!

When the music changed to dance tempo, Neal asked her to dance. Once she entered his arms she felt as if Kurt had never returned to create this conflict. Oh this was what she wanted—this protected, safe feeling she had when she was close to Neal. "Neal," she asked brokenly, "you're wondering why I didn't tell you about Kurt?"

He nodded slowly. "I want to know, Glenna."

She forced herself to go on. "You see, I really came here to get away from him. I knew he wasn't in love with me and I wanted to forget him."

"Were you very much in love with him?" The question cost him a great effort. She felt him, tense and tight-drawn.

"Yes," she answered, wishing she didn't have to say it. "But I'm not any more." She lifted her eyes to his. "Really, I'm not," she insisted. She felt irritated with herself. Why did she have to say 'really'? Of course it was all over. She wouldn't allow it to be otherwise. But she longed to cry, Neal, let's you and I get away from this place! Let's be alone! This very minute!

THEY DANCED wordlessly now; she sensed Neal wished it that way. When the music stopped, he quietly released her. "I think I understand, Glenna." As he guided her through the crowd, he added, "Now let's be gay, shall...we?"

She forced a bright smile. "Right! This is our engagement celebration!" But she didn't feel elated. Something in Neal's words had chilled her. Did he really understand?

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When Kurt led her onto the floor for the next dance, she knew, the moment he put his hands on her, the strength of his attraction. She had to fight hard against it, for she was trembling. He danced with easy grace and she followed like a part of him. "Having a good time?" he asked, his lips against her soft hair.

Through stiff lips she answered, "Yes, you're a good host, Kurt."

"I want this to be fun, for old time's sake," he said, with easy poise.

How well he is taking this, Glenna thought carefully. But then, why shouldn't he? I'm just another girl to him. He had dashed to Laguna on a whim, expecting to be welcomed with open arms. The conceit! But wasn't he being a bit too gallant? Gallantry wasn't, she well knew, one of his strong points.

Friends of Neal's entered The Manzanita and came to their table. Kurt had additional tables brought up to make one big group. It was all very friendly and gay. When Kurt proposed a toast to the newly engaged, everyone was suitably surprised and effusive. Glenna's white face was a polite mask. She felt as if it would crack at any moment. Neal was unreadable, withdrawn, yet on the surface, congenial. No-one but Glenna knew he was not himself.

At last the evening ended and the party broke up. Neal deposited Kurt at his hotel and they said good-night. It was all very casual, ordinary. As they drove away, Glenna had a feeling of unreality. Last night, if anyone had told her she would be saying good-night to Kurt Anders from Neal's car, she'd have labelled them insane!

Not until they were inside her apartment and she'd tossed her coat over a chair and turned to face Neal, did the sense of unreality vanish. What she saw in his face was real enough....and terrible. His guard was down now, the lines of his face haggard. His eyes held blank despair. "Glenna," he said brusquely. "it's no good. You still love him. I saw it tonight!"

"No," she cried in shocked amazement. "That's not true!"

Doggedly he continued, as if he hadn't heard her. "I had to watch you together, to be sure. That's why I agreed to go tonight. Oh I could forgive you for not telling me. That I do understand." He looked at her with eyes dark with misery. "But you looked at Kurt with your heart in your eyes, and that I can't cope with. I know you so well, darling. I could feel you trying to conceal your emotions, but they spilled all over the place!"

"PLEASE believe me!" Glenna's words were a plea, so sincere in their entreaty that he stopped short. "What can I say to make you believe that I do love you?" Her voice was trembling. She was half-sobbing now.

"Let me prove it to you," she begged. "Give me a chance!"

Roughly he seized her shoulders. She almost cried out with pain. "What can you say?" His eyes perched hers. "Words won't do it, Glenna."

In one brief instant his arms tightened about her slender body and he crushed her to him. His lips found hers and he kissed her over and over again. "Glenna," he murmured into the soft hollow of her neck, "I love you so." He stroked her brown hair and held her head, lover-like, against his breast. He cupped her chin and tilted her head back, to search her eyes deeply. "I want so terribly to believe in you!"

"You can," breathed Glenna softly. Then, with all the ardor of her youth, she kissed him. When they parted, he looked at her searchingly, then, as if fearing to shatter the spell that laid over them, he turned and went out the door.

Quietly Glenna crossed to the bedroom and stood before the vanity and stripped off the gold bracelets. She had never experienced such a complete sense of security. There was no fear, no spot of doubt; she was safe now, and for always, with Neal. The tranquil moment of peace possessed her.

Next day was a bank holiday, so Glenna was free. She showered and fixed a quick breakfast. While she

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drank her coffee, she made plans. She would phone Neal and ask him to drive down the coast to La Jolla. It was a matchless day for an outing. Neal's clerk could take over the shop.

She hummed contentedly as she called his number. "Get yourself together, lad," she urged happily, "you and I are going on safari!"

"Not so fast, young lady," laughed Neal.

"No protests! We'll go to La Jolla and bask in the sun and have a lazy dinner!"

"Agreed!" said Neal. "Be with you in a jiffy."

She piled the few dishes on the drainboard; they could wait. She put on her prettiest, gayest blue-and-yellow day-time frock, found the white purse with the amber handles Neal admired. As she reached for a hankie, her hand touched the box containing the jade ring. She had thrust it in the drawer hurriedly, was it a hundred years ago, or only yesterday? She drew back her hand involuntarily. She didn't want the ring, and it was going back to Kurt, she decided firmly. She'd take care of that later.

The drive down the coast was perfect. The whole day was like that—no flaws. The air sparkled. The blue Pacific spread its restless waters before them. They parked the car at La Jolla's Cove and walked down the terraced paths to the sea. Serene, peaceful, the little gem of a cove basked in the sun, protected by the strong rocky arms of the brown ledges. Glenna felt safe, like the little cove. Neal's love was shelter, sanctuary.

At The Valencia they had dinner. They talked quietly, confidently and were conscious only of the completeness of the moment. When it was time to drive home, she was reluctant to leave. "Neal," she said impulsively, "let's come here often!" He touched her hand tenderly. He, too, felt the day's perfection.

Yes, thought Glenna as they sped along the highway, you don't have to live tumultously. Like this is the best way....

SHE HAD said good-bye to Neal and was just opening the door when she heard the phone ringing. It seemed too demanding, too loud. She wanted to hold the warm, sweet feeling that flowed through her. With irritation she answered. Kurt's voice struck across her ears with insistent force. "I've been calling you at intervals all afternoon," he said with annoyance. Then he altered his tone to ask pleasantly, "May I come over now?"

For an instant, the power and persuasion of his voice caught at her. She struggled against it, and won. Her tone was icy. "No, Kurt, you can't!" A wave of elation swept through her. No longer did she come at his beck and call.

"But surely you can't object?" he insisted.

"I can and I do!" she contradicted firmly. And now I've things to do, so good-bye!"

"Well!" Kurt was surprised. Plainly it was a shock to his vanity. "M'lady *has* changed! Something should be done about that!" His words were bantering, but his tone gave them the lie. Decisively he hung up.

How like him, thought Glenna, to think he could do something to change me, now! Kurt's conceit was disarming, and at times, frightening. Resolutely she pushed him from her mind and got ready for bed. She was pleasantly tired and her world was safe....

Next day was Saturday. She worked at the Bank until noon; then fussed around the apartment all afternoon. Neal was coming for dinner and she was busy preparing things she hoped he'd enjoy. They weren't going anywhere. They would just laze around, making plans and being contented. She hummed as she crisped lettuce, made celery curls and sliced tart apples for pie. Approvingly she inspected the extra-thick chops that any man would surely go for.

Then, with firm resolve, she found the box containing the jade ring. At her desk she reached for note-paper and pen. She wrote hurriedly,

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"KURT, I AM RETURNING THE RING AS I DON'T THINK IT IS FAIR TO KEEP IT, EVEN AS A WEDDING GIFT. I DON'T LOVE YOU AND THIS NOTE IS TO MAKE THAT POINT VERY CLEAR. NEAL IS THE MAN I LOVE. GLENNA."

She wrapped the box in the note and carefully tied a ribbon around it. She'd give it to Kurt at the first opportunity.

She was right about Neal and the chops. He consumed everything with unconcealed relish. He drank three cups of coffee and claimed the pie was a work of art! After dinner they sat close together on the sofa, pleasantly spinning dreams in a little world all their own.

When the knock came, she sat up straight, startled. It was loud knocking, and Glenna could hear suppressed laughter. Now who...? When she opened the door, a gay crowd of young people burst into the room. Glenna gasped in surprise. Her sister Alice grabbed her affectionately and kissed her soundly. "Glenna, you darling," she exclaimed.

Glenna could only murmur something vague. She was recognizing the rest of the crowd now. They were three couples she had known well in San Francisco. They crowded around her now to add their greetings to Alice's. Glenna disentangled herself and took a deep breath. "You've taken me by surprise," she said uncertainly, "but make yourselves at home."

"We meant it to be a surprise," chortled Alice. "Didn't we, Kurt?"

YES, THERE stood Kurt, a little to one side, looking smug and to one side, looking smug and self-possessed. Glenna eyed him with hostility.

"Well, something like that," he said off-handedly.

Then Glenna remembered herself and held up a protesting finger to stop the babble. She drew Neal forward and introduced him.

When she could get away, she took Alice into the bedroom and closed the door. She had questions to put to her sister. "Alice, why did you tell Kurt where I was?"

Alice's blue eyes were troubled. "I don't know how to tell you," she faltered miserably. "I didn't think it would cause any trouble after such a long time. And you know how persuasive Kurt can be!"

"Persuasive and selfish," agreed Glenna. "And I wrote you about Neal!"

Alice nodded. "But Kurt said he only wanted to say 'Hi' in passing through. I never dreamed...."

"We'll skip it," sighed Glenna. What was the use, now? "But just the same, I wish you hadn't come rushing down here like this."

"Don't look so glum," chided Alice. "We took the morning off from our jobs and flew down, and tomorrow we'll go back. So tonight let's have fun!"

Glenna softened. She loved her sister and this was no way to welcome her. "What would you like to do?" she smiled.

"Let's have a beach party!" She put her arm around Glenna, opened the door and swept her into the room. "Come on everybody! It's a beach party!" The crowd chorused approval. "Let's go!"

Kurt stepped forward eagerly. "We'll stop by my hotel and pick up the eats." Glenna looked intently at Kurt, now. Plainly he was very confident, pleased. A faint thread of suspicion tightened around Glenna's heart. Then she glanced at Neal. He was talking to one of the fellows, adapting himself nicely. Just the same, she didn't like Kurt's nearness. Even in the noisy, crowded room she was too keenly aware of his presence.

Hastily she grabbed her coat and thrust the note and ring into one of its pockets. She'd see Kurt alone tonight and return it to him. This was as good a time as any....

The impromptu beach party progressed smoothly. They built bonfires and circled around them, a laughing, merry crowd. Kurt's hotel had provided hampers of delicious food. Shouts of delight filled the

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air as they unpacked the delicacies. Crab salad, dainty sandwiches, jugs of steaming coffee. It was a lot of fun for everyone but Glenna. She couldn't get into the spirit of things. She circulated, smiling, talking, but the smile didn't spring from happiness and the words were forced. For her, all the evening's gayety had fled; it was hollow and meaningless. She and Neal had been so terribly happy, alone with their plans, before the crowd burst in. But she tried, now. They reminisced about parties and people in San Francisco. Glenna was polite, and in her turn, made the proper replies.

Kurt paid her little attention. He was casually friendly, and she wondered if he wasn't being a shade too careful about it.

They did hand-springs in the sand. They ran races and sang songs. At last Kurt drew himself up from the sand and strolled over to Glenna, who was standing with Neal. "Everyone is showing off tonight," he said affably, "how about you and I and Alice and Fred doing a doubles race to the rocks?"

Neal's lips tightened a little, but he said, "O.K. Go ahead and beat Alice and Fred!"

The two couples raced madly down the beach toward the barrier of rocks. Breathless, ready to drop, Glenna saw Kurt reach the spot first, then came in second. Alice and Fred were puffing along behind, given over to laughter. "We won!" called Kurt. "You two laggards drag yourselves back. We're going to explore the rocks."

GLENNA faced him, surprised and angry. She didn't want to explore anything, least of all slippery rocks with Kurt. But it was too late, as Alice and Fred were turning back now. "This is ridiculous," she stormed. He laughed and caught her arm, pulling her to him. "Oh come off it, Glenna!" He was fighting to control his impatience and the hold on her arm was rough. "You know you want to be alone with me!"

This was incredible! "You're insane to say that," she gasped. She tried to pull away, but he caught her to him purposefully, now. "You know you still love me; you've never really gotten over me! Oh, I know you're engaged to Neal, but you could end that."

She struggled against him. "Let me go, Kurt!"

"I love you when you're stormy, Glenna!" His arms tightened, vise-like. "When you ran out on me, it hurt my pride. No-one ever did that to me before. Well, I pocketed my pride and came after you. And I phoned Alice last night! I suggested they fly down today!"

"How dare you interfere like that!" She was furious; her voice shook.

"You wouldn't let me see you last night. I knew something had to be done to bring you to your senses!"

"And what do you think you've gained?" she asked evenly.

"You, of course!" He lifted his head arrogantly. "I planned for the beach party tonight," he boasted, "had my hotel prepare the food beforehand."

"You were sure of yourself," she said icily. In the half-darkness, she saw a smile lift his lips.

"It was easy. I had Alice suggest the entertainment for the evening. She did it innocently enough."

Glenna remembered the uneasy feeling she'd had before they left the apartment. Yes, things were too pat then, and she had sensed it.

Kurt continued relentlessly, "I thought if you were with the old crowd again it would make you want to go back to San Francisco with me!" In a burst of excitement his words rushed out, "Go back with me tomorrow, Glenna! I love you! I want to marry you!"

How she had longed to hear him say those words once! It was incredible he was saying them now. For an instant she was in the past, the hurtful, frenzied past, and this was the Kurt she had blindly adored. He was saying, "I want to marry you!" It was just an instant, but her body weakened and she felt soft and yielding.

Before she realized what was hap-

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pening, his lips pressed down on hers demandingly and his arms crushed her close. She was lost in the tumult of the moment—then she came awake as if an avalanche of snow had tumbled upon her. She drew away with such suddenness that she was completely free of his embrace. "I don't love you, Kurt!" Her words were the stinging, biting truth and he recoiled.

"If you think," he said sharply, "I've come down here for this kind of treatment, you're mistaken!"

Glenna turned quickly and looked toward the bonfires. She gasped in startled terror. Coming up the beach toward them was Neal! He was so close it was foolhardy to think he hadn't seen everything! She knew he had.

SHE STOOD stricken, for he had stopped now and was silently looking at them. She heard the loud pounding of the surf and the wild hammering of her heart. All she could think was, I love Neal so much, so deeply. I love him more than all the Kurts in the world! She knew then that she loved him completely. He wasn't just serenity and protection. He was ecstasy, too. And now she had lost him.

"The party's breaking up," Neal said coldly. "I came to tell you." He turned and started back.

"Well, we had an audience!" Kurt's sarcastic voice, so cold and unfeeling, sent a chill through Glenna. Hot tears stung her eyes. "I wouldn't marry you," she said, "if you got down on your knees!"

He looked surprised; hesitated, then shrugged in resignation, "I guess you mean it."

They walked back through the sand in icy silence.

When they reached the others, the fires had been extinguished. Mercifully, there was little light. Neal glanced briefly in her direction, then busied himself with the hampers.

How bitter he is this minute, she punished herself. All she could think of was her desire to be alone with Neal and explain things. She must tell him how much she really loved him. At last, she knew. Could she make him believe it? She had to try.

Now they were gathered around Kurt's car in the last minute flurry of good-byes. Kurt's face was a mask. She heard his brusque words and knew it was for the last time. She was struggling hard to keep her poise—soon this would be over.

At last she and Neal stood on the sandy road and watched the car disappear among the dunes.

Impulsively she turned to him. "Neal, I want to explain! When you understand it wasn't as bad as it looked. . "

He gazed at her in grim wonderment. "There's nothing to explain!" His voice was harsh, bitter. "Come, I'll drive you home!"

Mutely she obeyed. Tears filled her eyes. She touched her lips; they were trembling. But she must make him listen. She had to get though his bitterness somehow. "Please listen, Neal! I do love you. I meant it when I told you before, and I mean it now. Only now I know the depth of my love."

"Don't let's talk about it," he interrupted icily. "I've seen enough to the contrary. I've seen you kissing Kurt. Isn't that enough to make your avowal of deep love sort of worthless?"

"No, Neal, no!" she cried. "I do love you and it took Kurt's kiss tonight to show me how much. I can't help how crazy it sounds. It's the truth!"

In stony silence he drove to Glenna's apartment and drew up at the curb.

Well, it was all over now. She was about to get out of the car, but before she left, she wanted to ask one thing. In a small, lost voice she questioned, "What would it take to make you believe me?"

He laughed shortly and stared straight ahead. "It would take a lot more than words....it would take something in writing, I guess!" His voice trailed off, almost absently, as if he was thinking aloud. "I was so sure of you. I've been badly fooled. Yes, I think it would take

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something in writing to make me believe you now!"

IT WAS plain that he was through with the discussion. She must go now; she couldn't decently delay a second longer. This was it. She felt panicky. She was losing all she held dearest in the world. The sweetness of Neal's love would never be hers to cherish. Never would she know its warmth and ecstasy. Suddenly she plunged her hands deep in her coat pockets, as if to steady herself. In the right-hand pocket her fingers touched something: the ring wrapped around with the note to Kurt. She had forgotten to give it to him. No matter; she could mail it.

Suddenly a thought stirred in her mind and would not go unheeded. She struggled for its meaning and found it. Neal had just said that to make him believe her it would take something in writing! Of course he hadn't expected literal proof, but she had it, and right at her fingertips! Her explanation would do no good, but here she had the actual written words.

With fingers that shook, she drew out the box and unwraped the note. She handed it to Neal. "You want something in writing! Here it is! I meant to give it to Kurt tonight."

Neal snapped on the car lights and read: "KURT, I AM RETURNING THE RING AS I DON'T THINK IT IS FAIR TO KEEP IT, EVEN AS A WEDDING GIFT. I DON'T LOVE YOU AND THIS NOTE IS TO MAKE THAT POINT VERY CLEAR. NEAL IS THE MAN I LOVE. GLENNA."

He turned to look at her, his eyes burning and eager. "Glenna, you meant this when you wrote it! You mean it now!"

Softly she answered, "Yes. And there's something important I want you to know. Tonight I told Kurt I didn't love him. He asked me to marry him and I refused. You see, you couldn't hear what was said...."

"But I hear you now, darling," he burst in, "and I believe you! What more can I say?"

She laughed out of sheer happiness. This was her shining moment. "It'll take more than words, darling! I want a kiss!"

And she got her kiss! A rapturous, radiant kiss no girl could complain about!

THE END

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946

Of Ideal Love Stories, published quarterly at Holyoke, Mass. for October 1, 1950.
State of New York) ss.
County of New York)

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of the Ideal Love Stories, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N. Y.; Editor, Marie Antoinette Park, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N. Y.; Managing editor, Lillian Meisel, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N. Y.; Business manager, Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Columbia Publications, Inc., 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Harold Hammond, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements emgracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is—(This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1950. Maurice Coyne (My commission expires March 30, 1952. (SEAL)

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Dusty certainly was a strong-willed young man. But Belinda had certain ideas of her own!

"No," he said, "I'm not married. Not even engaged. But when I do get involved to that extent with a girl, she'll be a ranch girl, not one from the city."

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PURSUE HIM

By VIOLA CORNETT

BELINDA MARSHALL looked like one of those tiny, delicate China figurines that you find in exclusive gift shops. She was small and slender, blond and blue-eyed, with a tilted little nose, and a strawberry-pink mouth. The suits and blouses she wore to and from work, though suited to her job as a stenographer in one of San Francisco's biggest business offices, were nevertheless deliciously feminine. There was always something sweetly frivolous about her hats. In fact, Belinda was cute.

She was looking her cutest on the April day when she fell into Dusty Anderson's arms right smack on Market Street. It was an accident, of course. The platform-soled shoes that made Belinda half an inch taller than her actual five feet were a little bit hard to handle, since this was the first day Belinda was wearing them. Coming out of the lobby of her office building just after twelve, Belinda tripped. She'd have gone down flat on the sidewalk if there hadn't been a tall man right in front of her. And there she was, in his arms!

It was a nice place to be, Belinda discovered, looking up into a lean, brown, smiling face. Brown eyes twinkled down at her, and the lock of hair that showed under the brim of his hat was black and curly. He said, "Well, well! My first day in San Francisco, and something like this happens. I tell you, the town is wonderful." And he beamed at her.

Belinda swallowed. Something riotous was happening inside of her, Blushing, she drew herself out of the tall man's arms. She stammered, "M-my shoes. Th-they're new. I—"

He interrupted swiftly. "Whatever caused it, I'm grateful. It isn't every day that a beautiful blond falls into a man's arms out of a clear sky." He beamed at her again.

Then he went on, "Look. I think something like this ought to constitute an introduction, don't you?"

Belinda knew what he was leading up to. He wanted to see more of her. She hesitated. Belinda didn't go in for pick-ups. When a wolf whistled at her on the street, she lifted her small chin haughtily and pretended not to hear. But this was different, somehow. For one thing, this man wasn't a wolf-type. He looked nice, in a brown, outdoorish fashion. And, *she* definitely wanted to see more of *him*.

She said, blushing more deeply, "Y-yes. That is, I—my name's Belinda Marshall. I work in that building. But I don't work on Saturday afternoon."

The man's smile widened to a happy grin. "And this is Saturday afternoon, isn't it? Swell. Where would you like to have lunch?" Then he added, as an afterthought, "I'm Dusty Anderson, from Mendocino County, in town for a week on business. I own a sheep ranch up north,

Belinda was the all — or — nothing type!

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my brother's taking care of it while I'm gone. All my folks are ranchers. But that's neither here nor there. What matters is that it's April, and you're cuter than a little red wagon, and I'd like to do the town with you, honey."

Was he fresh? No, he was just gay and boyish, and sweet. Belinda said, "There's an awfully nice restaurant just around the corner, their steaks are wonderful. I like a good steak, don't you?"

He winked at her. "I sure do. Lead me to it, beautiful."

BELINDA enjoyed her steak, but she enjoyed Dusty's company more. He had a good, swift line, and kept her laughing. But there was more than laughter inside her. Just looking at Dusty across the little table in their booth made her happy. She'd never felt like this about any man before, though she was popular, and never wanted for dates. Belinda's blue eyes grew dreamy. Could there be something in this love at first sight idea, after all? She had always thought it was just fairy tale stuff.

After lunch, they found a pleasant little bar where they could dance. Dusty was a good dancer. Belinda's eyes grew even more dreamy as the two of them swayed around the small floor. Somehow, this was living. She felt as though she could never get enough of dancing with Dusty, of being with him. A faint panic touched her momentarily, at the realization of how much this chance encounter was meaning to her. Probably Dusty considered her merely a girl to have fun with in the big city. Maybe he was already engaged to some ranch girl up north. But she pushed the thought away, it upset her too much.

They danced until five, then went to another restaurant for dinner. The magic continued. Belinda felt breathless and uplifted, as though she were under some sort of spell. Never in all her twenty-one years had she felt like this before.

This restaurant had dancing in connection, so they danced there after dinner. Dusty held her very close. Looking up at him, Belinda saw that his face was oddly stern. He no longer hummed softly to the gaily romantic music. Something clenched inside her.

His new mood took much of the magic out of the latter part of the evening. Belinda felt cold and let-down when the time came to leave. On the way to her apartment in the taxi, Dusty sat on his own side of the seat, frowning a little. The sudden, amazing intimacy between them seemed to have ended.

But at her apartment house, he dismissed the taxi, walked into the lobby with her. One of the two elevators was at ground-floor level. When Belinda entered it, she found that Dusty was right behind her. He said, in a voice that sounded as though he were arguing with himself inwardly, "May I drop in for a last cigarette?"

She nodded dumbly. Dusty closed the doors, and she pressed the button for her floor, the fifth. Belinda's heart was beating fast all the way up in the elevator, then all the way down the hall to her apartment. Her hands shook as she unlocked the door, and snapped on the light in the living-room. When she turned to give Dusty a hostess's smile, he'd already closed the door behind him, and was very close to her. His hands fell on her shoulders, and his kiss seemed one continuous gesture of pulling her close and laying his warm mouth against her own.

The blood in her veins was liquid delight. Stars whirled against her dropped eyelids. Belinda lifted her hands in a little, groping gesture...

But the hands touched emptiness. Bewilderedly, she opened her eyes. Dusty had stepped away from her, out of reach. He was frowning again, and his mouth was taut. He said, "I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry."

BELINDA moistened her lips. Then she forced a laugh because she was bewildered, because there was fear inside her, because she was playing for time, somehow.

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"What's a kiss?" she said.

He stared at her. "You don't mean that. You felt it, too."

She understood him. And, understanding, the fear inside her increased. The kiss had meant a lot. Then why had he moved away from her so abruptly.

Before she could say anything further, he went on, almost vehemently, "But it can't lead to anything. It mustn't." And his jaw squared.

Now she, too, was frowning, in a puzzled fashion. "Why not, Dusty? What's wrong?" Her heart caught. "You—you're not married or anything, are you? Was that why you said you were sorry you kissed me?"

He shook his head. "No, I'm not married. Or even engaged. But when I do get involved to that extent with a girl, she'll be a ranch girl, not one from the city."

Her mouth went dry, and she felt cold inwardly. "Why?" she whispered.

His jaw was rock-like in its stubborn decisiveness. "Because two of my neighbors married city girls, and the marriages blew up within a year. You don't know what it's like, living on a ranch. Oh, it isn't physically tough, my place has plenty of modern conveniences. My wife won't have to draw water from a well and carry it in a bucket, or anything like that. But I'm twenty miles from the nearest town, and even that is only a wide place in the road, so to speak. For a city woman, such a life is lonely—and boring."

Now she understood his attitude, and, understanding it, she smiled in relief. "Goodness, is that all that's bothering you?" Feeling rushed through her, and she spoke quickly, almost wildly, "Dusty, you and I are attracted to each other like nobody's business. But now you're trying to push me away because you think I couldn't take your kind of life." She laughed, sweetly and surely, with a woman's indulgent mockery of male quirks and whims. "That's just plain silly. I've fallen for you, I can't deny it, and I don't want to deny it. Nothing like this ever happened to me before, with any man...and I've dated a lot of men!"

She took a breath. "I want to marry you. I admit that—proudly. And you mustn't shut me away just because I'm a city girl. I won't have it."

He kept staring at her, in an almost fascinated way. For a moment, his jaw relaxed, and he looked young, adventurous, eager. But then the stubborn look returned. "No," he said. "It wouldn't work. That's why I'm leaving, right now. That's why I won't be back."

He turned toward the door. She watched him, frozen. As his hand touched the knob, she made a little, involuntary forward movement, as though she were going to rush after him and seize his arm.

But the movement was never completed. Without a word, she watched the door open—and close, with a quiet, final sound. Then she raised a hand to her mouth. A mouth that trembled and trembled.

She didn't want the tears to begin, because she knew that when they did, she wouldn't be able to stop them. But suddenly her eyes were wet, and the ache in her throat was unbearable.

SHE WOKE early Sunday morning, to face a drained-looking, swollen-mouthed girl in her mirror. Always, Belinda's blue eyes had been full of young and hopeful laughter. But now they were the color of tragedy. In one afternon and evening, she had found heaven—and lost it. She thought drearily, "So where do I go from here?"

Dusty was staying at the Gate Hotel, on Post. He'd be there until the following Sunday, he'd told her. But so what? Dusty had made up his mind, and you could tell he was the sort of man who stuck to a decision, once he'd made it.

Breakfast was a dreary affair. Belinda scarcely tasted the food, or the coffee. She just went through the motions of eating and drinking. She didn't feel alive.

She looked through the Sunday

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paper listlessly. Then she opened it by chance to that part of the advertising section which was captioned: "Help Wanted—Female."

The third ad down caught her eye. It asked for a house-keeper for a ranch-house, and gave a newspaper box number as the address. Belinda laid the paper down abruptly. The advertisement had given her an idea. Maybe someone up around Dusty's ranch could use a housekeeper. If she took such a job, and stayed on a ranch for a couple of months, even, she might be able to persuade Dusty she could stand the lonely country life!

Belinda's blue eyes lit up. Dusty would be in San Francisco for a week. In that time, she certainly ought to be able to find one family up in his neck of the woods who could use a housekeeper. "And," Belinda thought triumphantly, "I could do a good job of it, too. Mother always said I was the most competent of her daughters in helping around the house."

Since cheerfulness was her natural state, Belinda felt terribly happy about her idea. Of course, she'd have to quit her present job, and jump off into space, but the stakes justified it. And Belinda was the all-or-nothing type.

She did leave herself a back door, though. She phoned Mrs. Winston the office manager, and asked if she could have a few days' emergency leave. Crossing her fingers at the fib, Belinda said there was sickness in her family, and she was needed at home. She felt sort of mean, deceiving the pleasant older woman, but she couldn't very well tell the truth, or Mrs. Winston would think she was a romantic little dope, probably. And Belinda wanted to be sure her job was still open if she couldn't find a job as housekeeper on a ranch near Dusty's.

DUSTY HAD told her all about where he lived. The little town he had mentioned was called Rock Point, and a phone-call to the bus-station assured her that there was regular service to the place, it was right on the main highway. Dusty had said there was a nice small hotel there, and that you could always get a room. Swiftly, Belinda packed a bag, and took a streetcar to the bus-station.

During the five-hour ride, she remained adventurously excited. Arriving at Rock Point at three in the afternoon, she took a room at the hotel, then went downstaris again to get something to eat at the restaurant next door. The waitress was young and friendly, and Belinda asked if she knew of anyone at the ranches roundabout who was looking for a housekeeper.

The waitress's smooth forehead wrinkled. "Let me think." She pondered for a moment, then snapped her fingers. "Say, I did hear that Mr. and Mrs. Jay Dodd were wanting someone to help them out. They have a place on the Willis Road. City people originally, wealthy, and Mrs. Dodd doesn't enjoy housekeeping. Want me to phone them for you?"

Excitedly, Belinda nodded. This was wonderful! Maybe she'd get a job on her very first day in Rock Point. If it wasn't too good to be true.

It wasn't! The waitress got the Dodds on the phone, and they wanted to talk to Belinda, said they'd drive in to see her at the hotel right away. Belinda liked the Dodds on sight. Mr. Dodd was tall and gray-haired, a retired business man who was raising blooded cattle as more a hobby than anything else, he told her, winking at his dainty gray-haired wife. "Lora says I'm strictly the gentleman farmer," he chuckled. "But I like an outdoor life. So does she, if she'd only admit it. She grew up on a ranch in Texas, and rides like a cowboy. In fact, if she didn't like the outdoors so much, we wouldn't need a housekeeper. But we do—especially since we do a lot of entertaining of friends from San Francisco."

Belinda told them she'd been doing office work in San Francisco, but the confining work had been bad for her health, and so the doctor told her to get out in the country.

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She was glad the Dodds didn't ask her about where she'd worked last, so they could get a reference from her former employer. They were easy-going, casual people, who apparently liked her on sight. When they went back to their ranch, Belinda was with them—her heart singing because now she'd be able to prove to Dusty Anderson that she could take ranch life.

The Dodds had a nine-room house, with plenty of space for guests. Belinda could tell it was going to be easy to take care of, though. The Dodds had the most modern cleaning and cooking equipment. Belinda settled down happily to whipping up a nice dinner for them. They were delighted with her cooking, and told her so. When Belinda went to bed that night, in a pretty little slant-roofed upstairs room, she was practically purring with contentment and hope.

THE WEEK went by swiftly. Belinda made discreet inquiries about Dusty Anderson. She learned that "every third person hereabouts is an Anderson." Which boiled down to the fact that Dusty, two of his brothers, and his parents, all had ranches in the vicinity. The Dodds said Dusty was a fine fellow, and a hard worker. Belinda said, in an offhand manner, that she had met him once, and let it go at that.

She wrote a note to Mrs. Winston, the office manager, and said that the condition in her family had grown more serious, and she wouldn't be able to return to San Fancisco. Belinda smiled happily as she wrote the letter. Of course, she wouldn't be able to go back to the city. She'd be Mrs. Dusty Anderson before many more months went by. Or, maybe, many more weeks!

Belinda knew how to ride horseback, and the Dodds gave her a little mare for her use. Next weekend, she was too busy to ride over to Dusty's ranch to see if he was home, for the Dodds had guests. But the guests went home Monday, and on Monday afternoon, Belinda saddled up the little pinto mare, Daisy, and started toward Dusty's place.

It was a clear, fresh spring day, and the winding road she followed led through flowering meadows. Belinda sang as she trotted along on the well-behaved Daisy. The small mare seemed to know she carried a girl who was all the way in love, for her neat hooves fairly danced over the dirt road.

They came to the outer gate of Dusty's ranch, and Belinda dismounted to open it, and lead the mare through, close the gate behind them. She followed this procedure with two more gates before she finally sighted the ranch-house. Her heart beat fast as she dismounted in front of it, and walked to the front door. Oh, how she prayed Dusty would be home!

He was. He answered her knock immediately, and Belinda's heart speeded even faster at the way he looked in blue jeans and rough shirt and high-heeled boots.

Dusty stared at her with bewildered brown eyes. At last he said, "What are *you* doing here?" His tone was stiff and forbidding.

Belinda moistened her lips. Dusty was certainly a definite and strong-willed young man. Just, now he was beginning to glare at her, as though getting ready to tell her off for pursuing him in this fashion.

She said quickly, "I'm a ranch girl now, Dusty. I've taken a job as housekeeper with Jay and Lora Dodd." She smiled up at him. "Isn't that swell?"

His jaw hardened. "What's the idea?" he snapped.

Belinda widened her eyes at him,

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playing for time. She hadn't expected Dusty to take this attitude. "Idea?" she said.

He scowled fiercely. "Yes," he growled. "I don't get it. You in this neck of the woods. It just doesn't fit."

So he was just puzzled, not really angry. Belinda's smile came back. She cried, "Why, Dusty, it's perfectly simple. We fell for each other in San Francisco, but you thought I couldn't take ranch life. So I decided to come up here and get a job on a ranch, and prove to you that the life agreed with me." Her eyes met his confidently.

He looked at her for a moment in silence, and several emotions seeming to be warring within him, even in that short space of time. Then he said, "You're working for Jay and Lora Dodd?"

Belinda nodded happily. Now Dusty was begining to get the idea. In a moment, he'd weaken, and take her in his arms, she was sure.

THEN DUSTY laughed shortly—jeeringly! He said, "So you're training for lonely ranch life by working for people who entertain half of San Francisco every weekend? That's really funny!" And he laughed again.

Now it was Belinda who felt puzzled. Dusty wasn't reacting as she had expected him to. Then she was suddenly angry. Blue eyes flashing, she cried, "You make me sick! Oh, you're acting so darned foolishly, Dusty. Stubborn and silly and..." Sheer fury choked her, she couldn't go on.

Dusty said in a dogged voice. "I'm being perfectly logical, and you know it. The Dodds don't live like normal ranchers, they're transplanted city people. They—"

If Belinda had paused to think, she wouldn't have done what she did next. But, for the first time in her life, she was too angry for speech. The only thing that would satisfy her was action, and violent action.

She slapped Dusty as hard as she could! Her hand stung from the blow. Then, while Dusty was still staring at her in an astonished way, she raged, "I don't know why I ever thought I'd fallen for such an idiot. You're impossible. And if I never see you again, it's too soon."

Dusty made a sudden, furious movement toward her. She could tell he was in a dangerous mood, but Belinda was too angry to be afraid. Eluding him, she laughed again, wildly. Again she cried, "You make me sick!" Then she ran for her horse, mounted her, and rode toward the gate.

She had a frightened moment or two when she dismounted to open the gate and lead the horse through. She was still close to the house, and Dusty could have caught up with her, easily. But he just stood on the porch, staring after her, his shoulders rigid. As she closed the gate behind her, Dusty stalked into the house, and slammed the front door resoundingly.

Belinda let out an involuntary breath of relief. Then, as she remounted, tears filled her eyes, ran down her cheeks. All the magic was gone from the April afternoon. The flowers beside the road didn't talk her language any more, and the bright sunlight seemed to taunt her with its joyous gold. Desolately and slowly, Belinda rode toward home.

IT RAINED nearly all of the week that followed. The gray weather matched Belinda's mood. She moped about the house until finally Lora Dodd burst out, "What on earth is wrong with you, Belinda? You look ready to burst into tears if somebody points a finger at you."

For a moment, Belinda wanted to tell Lora all about Dusty. Then she decided not to. It was better to be dignified, and keep the whole thing inside of her. She'd made a fool of herself, chasing a man so hard-headed and stubborn. And she was hanged if she'd tell anybody about it.

Belinda forced a smile. "Oh, it's just the rain. Weather like this depresses me."

Lora smiled at her. She said kindly, "My dear, you've been working

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too hard, I'm afraid—and not having the fun a young girl needs." Her voice grew warm. "There's a dance at the schoolhouse tonight. Jay and I will take you to it, and you can dance to your heart's content. That will make you feel better, I'm sure."

Belinda didn't want to go to a dance, not one little bit! But Lora over-rode her arguments, and after dinner that evening, Belinda found herself being carried off to the schoolhouse by her employers, whether or not. Since Belinda liked Lora and Jay Dodd very much she didn't protest a lot, that seemed ungracious. But she was in a very bad mood when all of them arrived at the schoolhouse. The sound of gay music didn't cheer her up, it only depressed her further. After you have fallen deeply in love, there is only one man in the world you really want to dance with, and dancing with anybody else is no fun at all.

There was a crowd in the schoolhouse, made up of equal parts of younger and older people. The young men discovered Belinda at once, and she was immediately besieged for dances. She made herself smile, and did her best to be agreeable. But her heart felt like a stone inside her.

Then she saw Dusty! He wasn't dancing, but standing against the wall, frowningly watching the dancing couples. When he saw her, he stiffened, and his jaw hardened. Anger rocketed inside Belinda. He could at least have acted pleasant, instead of glaring at her the way he was doing. Deliberately, she started to laugh gaily, and to flirt with her partner.

He was named Joe Martin, he was a sheep-rancher, and very handsome in an arrogant way. He had red hair and green eyes, and Belinda could tell he was a man who was used to having girls fall for him right and left. Personally, she didn't care for him, he seemed too much the conceited type, but she'd have flirted with a totem pole just then, to show Dusty Anderson she didn't care two cents about him and his stubborn, foolish whims.

Joe responded, enthusiastically. He held her a little too tightly, danced with his cheek against her forehead, and claimed the next two dances with her as well.

IT WAS in the middle of the third dance that someone touched Joe on the shoulder and said brusquely, "Cut!"

Scowling, Joe relinquished her to another pair of arms. Belinda's heart beat fast as she looked up at Dusty. He seemed grimly angry, his mouth was tight. He whirled her once around the floor in silence, then said, "Just for your information, watch it with Joe. He's a wolf from away back."

She glared up at him. "I don't need you to tell me how to take care of myself, Mr. Anderson!"

His big body stiffened, and his brown eyes were dangerous as he glared right back at her. He said, his voice as dangerous as his eyes, "You're a little fool. You don't know this country. The men up here are harder to handle than the smooth city boys you're used to."

If they'd been alone, she'd have slapped his face again, whatever the consequences. Instead, she gasped furiously, "I hate you, Dusty Anderson!"

She tried to pull herself out of his arms, to walk off the floor and leave him standing there. But Dusty tightened his hold on her. "Oh, no," he said grimly. "We'll finish this dance."

She was angry enough to scream. But, of course, she didn't. Nor did she fight Dusty's firm grip of her, that would have been undignified and futile. In white-faced silence, she finished the dance with him. In the most courteous fashion, he took her back to Lora Dodd, who was sitting, with some of the other older women, in chairs set against one of the walls. He gave her a stiff nod for goodbye. Then he stalked away.

Ready to cry, Belinda dropped into the empty chair beside Lora. She cried furiously, "I hate your darned old ranchers! I'm going back to San Francisco. I..." Then she

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had to bite her lower lip to stop its quivering, and sneak up her handkerchief to wipe sudden tears from her eyes.

Lora stared at her keenly. Then she said, "What's wrong, Belinda? Surely Dusty Anderson wasn't giving you a bad time? He's a nice fellow."

Belinda said in muffled voice, "That's what you think!" She was having a hard time fighting tears. She felt utterly miserable.

From the sudden gleam in Lora's eye, Belinda could tell she was remembering Belinda had met Dusty before tonight. The older woman opened her mouth to say something. But just then Joe Martin swaggered up, thumbs inside his ornate, hand-tooled leather belt. He said, "Next dance, honey? The music's starting again."

To dance with Joe once more would be a slap in Dusty's face, after he'd warned her against the red-headed man. Belinda tossed her blond head. "I'd love to," she said, smiling up at Joe. The smile was deliberately flirtatious.

But as she danced with Joe, she suddenly realized he'd been drinking too much. Lora told her that some of the men kept liquor concealed in the schoolhouse cloakroom, and sneaked nips in between dances. Evidently Joe had taken more than one too many a nip. He held her much too tightly, and when he whirled her, both of them nearly fell down, he was that unsteady on his feet. Belinda grew increasingly more embarrassed and upset. When the dance ended, she said swiftly, "Take me back to Lora, Joe. I—I think I'd better tell her I'm ready to leave. She and Jay didn't want to stay up too late, she said."

BUT JOE held on to her arm, smiling down at her unsteadily. "Aw, no, honey. Don' go. Stay with papa—papa likes cute li'l blonds." Then he pulled her close and kissed her, right in the middle of the dancehall.

Belinda didn't enjoy being pawed! She pulled free, and, after giving Joe a good, healthy glare, she started to walk away from him. But he caught her arm again, and hung on, despite her efforts to free herself.

Then a voice said at Belinda's elbow, "'Tain't funny, Joe. Let her go. Come on."

It was Dusty. His tone was even, casual, but Belinda could tell by his tight-lipped expression that he was angry. Whether at her or Joe, she couldn't tell.

Joe turned on Dusty. Anger seemed to sober him a little. He said, "Look, Anderson, keep out of this, will you?"

Dusty stood his ground. "The lady isn't interested, pal. Why make a pest of yourself?"

Joe said something low and profane. Then, without warning, he swung a fist toward Dusty's jaw. The other man ducked, and then his right arm moved in a swift, neat uppercut. Joe went down on the waxed floor, out cold.

People gathered around, talking loudly and excitedly. Somebody started to work reviving Joe. Dusty glared down at Belinda. He snapped, "I hope you're satisfied! I warned you, but no, you had to ask for trouble. You make me sick."

Belinda burst into tears. Then, wildly, she ran toward the door of the schoolhouse, into the fresh night air.

It wasn't raining tonight, it was beautifully clear. A young moon rode low overhead. The scene was romantic, but Belinda had no eyes for that, she was too miserable. She hurried to the Dodds' car. It wasn't locked, and she got inside, into the rear seat, and went on crying.

In a short time, the Dodds came out, too. Lora soothed Belinda, and petted her. Then they all drove home.

Belinda spent a miserable, sleepless night. She awoke next morning with the fixed determination to leave for San Francisco immediately.

The Dodds argued with her, but made no headway. At last they agreed to drive her to Rock Point, where she could take the bus.

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The Dodds left her at the little bus station, half an hour before the next bus was scheduled to arrive. It seemed to Belinda that Lora Dodd had a strange look in her eye as she and her husband said goodbye. Belinda felt low and discouraged as she settled down to wait for the bus. Her great adventure had certainly turned out badly. She thought bitterly, "I *hate* Dusty Anderson," But she knew, even as she said it, that she was lying. She loved him, and always would. And now she was going to live the rest of her life without him...

THEN SHE gasped, and came to her feet. For Dusty, tall and virile in his ranch-outfit, was striding into the bus-station!

He saw her, came directly toward her. He began, without preliminary, "Lora phoned me you were leaving. Said she suspected I was the reason you were so upset. So I got down here, but quick."

She couldn't believe her ears. She stammered, "B-but why? I thought you didn't like city girls. I thought you were just absolutely disgusted with me, after last night."

He gave her a sheepish, reluctant grin. "Honey, I'm a stubborn character, I'll admit that. When I get an idea in my head, it takes an avalanche, practically, to change it."

He gulped. "But the way I felt when I watched you flirting with Joe Martin last night—honey, I was fit to be tied!"

He seized her in his arms suddenly, right there in the crowded bus station. Indifferent to the people watching and listening in, he went on, almost wildly, "I was sore last night. I felt like beating you up, you little devil. But after I got back to the ranch, I walked the floor all night. This morning, I realized I couldn't stand life without you. I'd just come to that realization when Lora phoned me. And, believe me, I burned the road up, getting down here before the bus came!"

Belinda felt dizzy with happiness. Dusty wasn't fighting her any longer, with his stubborn conviction that city girls made bad ranch-wives. She began to smile as she looked up at him. Then she whispered, "We've already created a scandal in this bus-station. I don't think it would be any worse if you kissed me, Dusty!"

He wasn't the sort of man who needed a second invitation to kiss his girl. The room spun madly as Dusty's lips met Belinda's. She thought deliriously, "I was born for this." And then—she stopped thinking!

THE END

THE SECRET

This little heap of ashes on the hearth
Seems innocent enough. I know it better
Than she who sweeps and cleans;
To me it means
The glory that was offered in a letter,
The secret that I must forever hide,
Though teardrops dampen closely shuttered lashes,
Of lips I shall not kiss,
Of tryst that I must miss—
Upon the hearth, a little heap of ashes.

by Lalia Mitchell Thornton

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"I was a fool to hand you over without a struggle!"

Abby Was Stubborn

By India Frances Braden

Now that she found herself so vitally interested in the shy young man who came to lunch each week with the beautiful red-headed girl, Abby was beginning to wonder if she had really been in love after all.

SHE ALWAYS met him for lunch on Tuesday. She had been meeting him for twelve Tuesdays straight. You could set your watch by their entrance. They always arrived at quarter after one. They always came through the side door of the tea room and sat at the corner table beside the window which looked out over the snow peaked mountains.

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The girl was smart looking and wore expensive clothes, and looked like the product of some sophisticated finishing school. But something about her smile disturbed Abby. It was too flashy and never lighted up or changed the cold expression in her eyes. And because of the insincerity of the girl's smile, Abby felt a pang of pity for the tall, angular, half shy young man who accompanied her each Tuesday. At least Abby thought it was pity at first, but could pity race your pulse, prick your heart and turn your knees to water?

Each time Abby took their order she became more intent upon the young man. Once she noticed that the cuff of his coat sleeve was slightly frayed and that sometimes there was a tinge of sadness in his dark eyes. Somehow, he just didn't seem suitable for the glamourous girl he brought to the tea room each Tuesday. Of course Abby couldn't blame him for being in love with the girl. She was beautiful enough to take any man's breath away with her gorgeous red hair and perfect curves. But Abby wasn't surprised to find them quarreling one day between the appetizer and the salad course. The girl's eyes shot angry sparks and the young man's jaw looked proud and stubborn.

Abby felt sure they'd make up though. She knew a lot about lover's quarrels because she had opened this little tea room as a result of a quarrel she'd had with Monty Winters who had been her fiance. When Abby's father had died she had used his insurance money to go into business. Monty wanted her to open a road house here in this very spot along the Arizona desert road that lead into Silver Creast, the little western village tucked between tall mountains. But the night club idea hadn't appealed to Abby near as much as opening a small, dainty little tea room that would be so romantic in atmosphere it would lure couples from the village as well as attract tourists en route to California.

So Abby's stubborn determination to settle on the tea room had made Monty walk out on her. She hadn't seen or heard from him since she first opened her new business five months ago. But now that she found herself so vitally interested in the shy young man who came to lunch each week with the beautiful red headed girl, Abby was beginning to wonder if she had really been so much in love with Monty in the first place.

BY THE time Abby served the desert to the couple she realized that they weren't even close to making up. In fact their anger seemed to have mounted instead of cooled, and the girl instead of eating the orange sherbert that was Abby's most prized receipt, rose from the table and walked out on the young man. Abby saw her get in a long cream convertable and drive away with a screech of gears.

For a long moment the young man just sat there and looked down at the orange sherbert. Abby's heart went out to him and suddenly, not meaning to at all, she was walking over to his table and handing him her nicest smile.

"I hope you like the sherbert," she said, her mouth whimsical. "It's a receipt that I have worked over and over to perfect."

"It's delicious," the young man replied standing up. "Won't you sit down? I'm Reg Manley. You must be Miss Patton, owner of the tea room?"

Abby smiled again. It was so easy to smile when you looked at Reg Manley. He not only made your lips curve in that upward and outward manner, but he did crazy things to a girl's heart; at least Abby found it that way. And the beautiful red head that just walked out on him would probably feel the same way once she had cooled off.

"You're always the same, aren't you?" Reg Manley asked, "I've watched you each Tuesday and you never seemed to be ruffled or upset or confused about anything. I'll bet you never fly into a rage or raise your voice to people."

Abby knew that he was feeling bitter and resentful with his girl at

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the moment. She wondered what they had quarreled about. It must be something terribly important to make the girl so huffy and hostile.

Reg Manley began to eat the orange sherbert and to keep from looking directly at him, Abby stared dreamily out the large window. There was a little pantry next to the last row of tables and she could hear Uncle Jack fussing with the dishes. He was an old man who had come to the tea room hungry one day and offered to wash dishes for a dinner. Afterward he had asked Abby for a job and she hadn't had the heart to refuse him. And she had never been sorry she hired him because there were so many odd jobs he could do to help out during rush hour.

After Reg finished eating he got up from the table and reached into his pocket for the money to pay his check. Abby was staring at him with the most desperate feeling. If he didn't patch up his quarrel with the pretty girl he might never come back, she might never see him again!

Then suddenly he took an uncertain step forward and his legs seemed to fold up under him. He crumpled to the floor with a heavy thud and lay there as still as death. Frantically Abby bent over him to make sure he had only fainted, then she rushed for Uncle Jack. He hurried in with spirits of Ammonia while Abby phoned the doctor.

While they were waiting for the doctor's arrival, Abby and Uncle Jack moved Reg into her apartment back of the tea room. Abby hoped that Uncle Jack wouldn't notice the tenderness with which she drew the blankets up over Reg Manley and tucked them under his chin. The way her hand lingered on his hot, feverish brow.

THAT WAS on Tuesday. Now it was Friday afternoon at six o'clock. The sun was busy painting the sky a beautiful shade of pinkish purple and bits of it played on the white curtain in Reg Manley's room. Abby had taken Uncle Jack's room back of the kitchen and Uncle Jack and Reg had occupied her two room apartment. Only Reg didn't know he was occupying any special place in a girl's house or heart. He had been unconscious for the duration of his stay and the doctor had pronounced him a victim of the worst kind of malaria.

There had been moments during his delirium when he had stretched out his hand to Abby in a groping gesture and had cried, "Please listen, Vi!" He had repeated this over and over and Abby knew that he was pleading with the pretty girl who's name must be Vi.

Once he had said, "But I can't take that job with your Dad. It just isn't my type of work!" This cleared up the mystery that had puzzled Abby about the reason for their quarrel.

Since Reg wouldn't ever know about it, Abby had taken his hand in hers several times and held it for long magic moments. Once, she kissed him hurriedly.

That Friday afternoon Abby had just come into Reg's room with a glass of tomato juice when she found his eyes opened instead of closed. She almost dropped the glass. Somehow he had seemed so completely hers while he was unconscious. Now that he was awake she realized that he was almost a stranger. A handsome stranger from whom she couldn't possibly expect love because he wore another girl's brand.

"Well, hello there," he said, grinning, "It looks as though I did some kind of a fade-out and some guardian angel took me in and nursed me back to health."

"Not altogether," Abby complained, "You've got a long way to go yet to be in tip-top shape. Uncle Jack and I searched through your bill fold for a name and address to notify in case of illness, but you didn't seem to belong in any particular place so we decided to keep you here."

"An excellent idea," Reg grinned, "and who's Uncle Jack and how long have I been here and what is your first name? I hardly had a chance to get acquainted with you before I pulled that crazy black out. The

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only thing I know about you is that your hair is like roasted chestnuts and your smile as fresh as four o'clock in the morning dew."

Abby answered all of his questions and then she went in and cooked him an old fashioned cup custard made of eggs and sugar and cream and all of the things necessary to bring back the color to Reg's pale face.

When she returned with it he ate every bite and then sat up in bed. "Well, I'd better be getting out of here," he said, "I've been enough trouble already. I've had a return of that Maleria at various intervals ever since the war. The last one I had was over a year ago and I thought it was gone for good."

"Oh, but you can't go away!" Abby protested. "not yet."

SHE HOPED Reg wouldn't detect the urgency in her voice, the intense emotion that was prompted by her longing to keep him near her. "The doctor is coming this afternoon," she added, "and maybe you can leave in a few days. We'll have to wait and see what he says."

He was silent for a moment looking about the apartment and frowning. Abby felt her color mount. "Uncle Jack has been sleeping here in the room with you on the other sofa which also makes a bed. I've taken his room back of the kitchen."

Reg grinned. "I'm disappointed. I thought I'd get a chance to make an honest woman out of you!"

Abby wanted to say, "and you'd hate that." But the tears were too close to trust her voice. Of course Reg Manley was being polite. He no doubt felt indebted to her, but once he returned to town Abby knew he'd beat a hasty path to the girl named Vi's door. He would probably reconsider and take that job her father had offered him.

The doctor gave Reg permission to get up the next day. He and Abby walked out in the back yard where Uncle Jack was feeding the cats. There were seven of them all together, plump and playful.

"You'd never believe they're all strays, every single one of 'em," Uncle Jack said, "Abby's like that. Takes in a stray every time. Heart as big as all outdoors. I'm practically a stray myself. I came here broke and out of a job. She took me in and just look how saucy I am now?" he chuckled in a pleased manner, "she did the same for a sailor who just dropped by here, down on his luck, broke out with his girl. Yes, Abby's a little.."

"Stop it Uncle Jack!" Abby protested violently. Somehow she didn't want Reg Manley to know too much about her. Nor did she want him to ever discover that she was hopelessly in love with him. That's why she had been so brisk and impersonal since he was convalescing. If she dared to soften up even a little bit she was sure to go too soft.

The next night Uncle Jack talked up the village square dance with such enthusiasm that Reg asked Abby if they couldn't attend. He promised not to be too vivacious and to spend most of the evening watching the other couples dance.

Little did Abby dream that she wouldn't be able to sit on the sidelines with him, that she'd be exerting all her efforts trying to cope with Monty Winters.

Monty, dressed in overalls and a big straw hat, was the first person Abby saw when they walked into the large barn where the dance was being held. He came over to them just as though he had never quarreled with Abby. He seemed excited over seeing her again. He kept showering her with attention and compliments and when Abby finally pulled away from him and went to sit with Reg, he protested with an angry outburst, "Abby's my fiancee!" he announced to Reg, "we had a silly lover's quarrel but it's all blown over now and Abby belongs to me!"

Abby wanted to slap him but he'd been drinking and she was afraid to start a scene. She was afraid he might get all worked up and start fighting Reg who wasn't in any condition to defend himself. But for a moment Abby longed for Reg to be well and enough in love with her to give Monty a black eye. However

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this was impossible and since Monty was still raving, Abby decided that the only way to quiet him would be to go back onto the dance floor with him and join the other couples.

A FEW MINUTES later she looked all around but Reg was nowhere in sight. Abby supposed that he had gotten tired and gone home. Especially was she sure of this when she discovered that her roadster was gone. Reg had been sure that Monty would see her home, so he'd taken the car.

Disturbed lest Reg might be feeling worst, Abby insisted that Monty take her home after a few more dances. All the way out to Abby's tea room Monty tried to make her reconsider about changing her business into the road house. He hadn't really forgiven her for not taking his advice.

"You could be really raking in the chips, Abby, if you'd only listened to me," Monty insisted. "and if you ever do wise up be sure to get in touch with me!"

Abby felt exhausted after she got home. Having to fight off Monty Winter's kisses all the way was enough to exhaust any girl. Hurrying inside Abby rushed through the tea room and knocked on the door of the apartment which Reg and Uncle Jack had been occupying. Uncle Jack came to the door sleepy-eyed and explained to Abby's dismay that he hadn't seen Reg and thought he was with her.

Abby hurried outside and found her car but no sign of Reg anywhere. He must have caught a ride from someone along the highway. He had slipped into the apartment, changed from the rustic clothes he'd worn to the barn dance into his business suit, and slipped out again without waking Uncle Jack.

Abby was broken hearted. She couldn't believe that any person could have so little gratitude. But could she expect anything different? She could have sent Reg to a charity hospital and for a moment she wished she had.

However she didn't give up altogether. Abby stilled her heart with the hope that Reg would write to her even if he went back and took the job with Vi's father.

So she began to fill her days with wild expectancy before the mail carrier came by in his battered old car, and dismal disappointment after he'd gone.

WEEKS PASSED but Reg didn't write. Abby tried to tell herself that he wasn't worth the tears she shed over him every night. That he was completely without appreciation, gratitude. Uncle Jack never mentioned him but Abby could read the sympathy and distress in his tired, faded eyes when he looked at her. Abby hoped passionately that if he had gone back to Vi they wouldn't resume their regular Tuesday luncheon dates at her tea room. Somehow she felt sure she couldn't stand seeing him again with the pretty red head.

Soon Abby's business began to suffer from her lack of enthusiasm. Something had gone from the smile she used to offer her customers. Her greetings were less cordial. She even quit preparing special dishes on certain days. She just didn't seem to have any desire to be successful any more. So after things got so much worse, Abby called Monty and told him she had decided to take his advice about the road house idea. She would let Monty take care of the bar while she superintended the dinning room. It seemed like the only way out since the tea room wasn't paying off any longer. But the idea of giving it up pained Abby's heart every time she thought about it.

On Tuesday before the men were supposed to start remodeling the tea room, Abby looked out the window and saw the long cream colored convertable that belonged to the girl named Vi, drive up to the door. Abby clung to the back of a chair for support. Her worst fear had come to pass! Reg and the pretty red head were coming to lunch!

Abby closed both eyes and prayed, and then she opened them again with an artificial smile pinned on her lips. The couple were inside the

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doorway. Abby blinked and almost gasped!

The man with Vi wasn't Reg Manley! He was a tall, handsome blond with wavy hair. Vi smiled at Abby and they went straight to the table she and Reg always occupied. Abby took their order and the relief was overwhelming inside her. But she was full of curiousity also. Where was Reg? And why hadn't he made up with Vi?

Unable to resist the temptation Abby paused a moment in the little pantry just outside the main room. She heard Vi say to the blond young man, "Well, how does she affect you?"

"How does who affect me?" the young man asked.

"The little brunette who just took our order?"

"Baby, she leaves me cold! How could I have eyes for any other girl when I'm with you!"

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Vi replied in a smug tone, "She's the girl Reg and I had the terrible quarrel about that broke us up! You should have heard the way he raved over that mousy little thing. I accused him of having fallen in love with her and he didn't even have the courtesy to deny it!

"I'm glad you're more sensible, Bob. I'm sure we're going to get along famously!"

ABBY ALMOST dropped the dish towel she was holding. Reg loved her! He had quarreled with Vi over her! The words seemed to swim over each other and burst her heart with new hope, new joy. But if he loved her why hadn't he admitted it? Why had he run away?

The more Abby thought about it the more confused she became. The confusion continued all the time Abby waited on Vi and her new beau. All the time she washed the dishes. It continued after she'd gone to her apartment that night, turned on the lights and gotten out a book to read.

Then her door bell rang. Abby ran all the way through the tea room to the front door. It was silly of her to be so nervous, so jumpy when it could be a late guest asking if she'd mind opening up and frying them a hamburger.

Abby opened the door and then she almost closed it again because she was sure she'd seen a ghost, and ghosts weren't supposed to be around except at Halloween.

"May I come in, Abby?" Reg Manley's voice asked.

Abby nodded, stepped aside and then she noticed that Reg had reached in his pocket and was handing her a piece of paper that looked like a check.

"This check covers my room and board and also full payment for the excellent nursing care you gave me. I called the hospital to find out what a nurse receives for a day's work, to be sure you weren't underpaid.

"Honey, I was really down and out when I left you. I didn't even have a job. My real estate business had gone on the rocks and Vi's father wanted me to take a job in his firm that wasn't really a job at all. Just a soft spot for his future son-in-law.

"When I left here I had a lot of false pride, I guess you'd call it. After Uncle Jack told me about the strays you took in, I got the idea I was just another stray and you only felt sorry for me. I was full of negative thoughts at the time but after I got my new job and got back on my feet, things began to brighten up. I took hold of myself and realized that I was going to fight like all get out to change any feeling you had for me, pity or what ever it might be, into the real McCoy.

"I was a fool to hand you over to Monty without a battle. So here I am, baby, serving notice that I'm ready to do anything to make you mine!"

Abby smiled. "All you have to do is pull down the shade and kiss me. Then you can call Monty and tell him that business offer is cancelled."

Abby knew suddenly that she wouldn't have to give up the little tea room now. She could keep her house by the side of the road and all her stray cats because love had come home to her heart.

THE END

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The latest platter patter brought to you right from Broadway's Tin Pan Alley.

"Marrying For Love"..."The Best Thing For You"... Perry Como...RCA Victor...Perry Como jumps the gun with two top-drawer selections from the Irving Berlin score for "Call Me Madam." Not only is his preview (the entire score will be recorded by RCA Victor) the first, but it will also be one of the best, for the tunes fit Perry's interpretive talents like a glove. He himself considers the numbers as two of the finest he's ever etched. Topside is an old-fashioned ballad about an old-fashioned idea, and Perry sings it in the old-fashioned way—warm, direct and sincere. Both A and B sides are medium-tempoed ballads. It's a fortunate record collector indeed that has the advantage of being introduced to this exciting new score by no less stellar artist than Perry Como. Mitchell Ayres sets the proper romantic mood in the orchestral backing on both sides.

"Be My Love"..."Only A Moment Ago"...Billy Eckstine... M-G-M..."The Great Mr. B." leads off the singles on this release with one of his greatest records to date. The "A" side offers a rich new tune culled from the hit-studded score for MGM Pictures' musical "Toast of New Orleans". Billy's voice sounds at its very peak as he wends his way meaningfully through a memorable lyric, giving its sentiment both power and warmth. His efforts continue at a high level in the outstanding tune which occupies the coupling side. The atmosphere here is hushed and intimate—yet the whole trembles with excitement. Russ Case con-

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ducts a large orchestra in sumptuous backgrounds for both sides, adding his knowing touch to a pair of truly thrilling sides.

"So Long Sally"..."These Foolish Things"...Paul Weston and his Orchestra...Columbia...The first side gets a splendid send-off in Paul Weston's leisurely arrangement, with the Norman Luboff Choir chanting the lyrics in fine, sentimental style. On the reverse side, Paul Weston's setting of this great standard song uses the Norman Luboff Choir and the orchestra in a superbly romantic fashion, giving it a fresh, new sound.

"The Lovebug Itch"..."A Prison Without Walls"...Eddy Arnold, The Tennessee Plowboy and his Guitar...RCA Victor...Eddy Arnold, one of the pace-setters in the current metropolitan popularity of country music, entrenches himself even more firmly with city slickers and rural rooters with two new sides for RCA Victor. With his electric guitar and string background, the Tennessee Plowboy serenades first with an amusing ditty penned by country canary Jenny Lou Carson, then with a mournful melody about a suitor of the hinterlands who for the crime of loving is in a "Prison Without Walls". Both songs are a departure from Eddy's usual ballad performance and utilize new effects in the accompaniment which enhance their charm.

"Deep Water"..."Gee, But It's Lonesome Out Tonight"...Al Rogers with The Rocky Mountain Boys...MGM...Deep voiced Al Rogers comes up with another fine coupling to back up the promise of his first few, recently-released MGM-ers. On the upper-deck here, he offers an appealing new ballad. His vocal is rich and sincere and the side moves along nicely with a smooth, jogging tempo set up by The Rocky Mountain Boys. On the flip, his tune is a sweet little love-song. Once again, Al seems to strike exactly the right note with his styling, and again The Rocky Mountain Boys supply neatly-tailored backing.

"Silver River"..."Proud Little Heart"...Dusty Walker...Columbia...A lonesome sort of Western song is attractively presented by Dusty Walker in a moderate tempo ballad with romantic overtones, sung to a pretty string orchestra backing. The flip side, Dusty sings a jaunty song to a heart that refuses to admit it was wrong, delivering his lyrics against a cheery string orchestra backing that indicates a happy ending.

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Glenna's eyes burned and she wondered if she would ever get to sleep again. But she wasn't crying now. There were no tears left.

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WRONG GAL ON THE HONEYMOON

Romantic Novelette

"A marriage without love might work out," Toby told her. "It's when you're in love that you get hurt."

THE CLOCK on the dressing table chimed a single silvery note. One o'clock in the morning, and Glenna Spencer lay on her back still staring at the ceiling. She wondered if she would ever again be able to sleep. Her eyes burned, but she wasn't crying now. There were no tears left in her.

Through the bedroom door she could see the bars of moonlight coming through the slats of the venetian blind in the next room. The moonlight glowed softly on pieces of silver that had been wedding presents for her and Floyd. Tomorrow she would have to return all those lovely presents and send out notices that the wedding had been cancelled.

She had hoped to save her pride by simply saying it was cancelled, but now she realized she would have to tell the truth. It would be in all the papers tomorrow, and everyone would know then that Floyd had jilted her the day before the wedding. They would know then that he had eloped with someone else.

Glenna closed her eyes, trying to shut from her mind pictures of tomorrow's headlines. All during their engagement they had received reams

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of newspaper publicity because she was a nobody, but now that Floyd had jilted her, the reporters would have a holiday. She could see the screaming black banners now: *Cinderella Jilted. Millionaire movie producer jilts secretary to wed star.*

Her cheeks burned with the humiliation of it. Tomorrow and for days afterward, she would go out on the street and see people turning to stare at her, pointing her out. Jilted on her wedding eve. Would she ever get over the shame, the hurt? Life stretched before her empty and barren. What was there left to live for?

Wearily she reached over and turned on the bedside lamp. She slipped into her short pale pink pajama coat and, sitting on the edge of the bed, lit a cigarette. Maybe if she drank a glass of warm milk it would help her get to sleep. But she knew that she could drink a gallon of the stuff and still be wide-eyed with grief.

If only Jane, who shared the apartment with her, were here, it might not be so lonely. But on second thought it was just as well she had gone to Reno for the week end. Because Jane was in love with Floyd, too. Oh, Jane had never come right out and mentioned his name, but it didn't take much imagination to know that it was Floyd she was eating her heart out over.

Both girls worked together at Godwin Studios, the movie company Floyd Godwin had inherited from his father and uncle. Glenna was secretary to Toby Carter, who wrote the kind of publicity that made actors into stars, and Jane was file clerk in the same office.

Jane had come from Kansas, and there was a young farmer back home who wanted to marry her. But Jane, like half the other girls at the office, had fallen in love with Floyd. For a long time Glenna hadn't known why Jane languished around the apartment like a wilting violet, then one Sunday morning Jane had burst out crying.

"I never thought I'd fall in love with my boss," she wept, "but I have. Every time I see him I get more and more hopelessly in love with him. He's so handsome and romantic and so—so kind to me. I can't bear working with him every day. I'm going to have to quit my job."

GLENNA had been shocked. Poor, homely Jane, with her freckles and buck teeth, in love with Floyd! Jane had even gone away over the week end so she wouldn't have to attend the wedding.

"I just couldn't stand it to go to your wedding," Jane had said. It will break my heart to have to listen to the ceremony and see him there, so tall and wonderful, and know he's in love with someone else. It's awful to know you can never mean anything to the one man you love."

Glenna had patted her hand understandingly. It was to have been such a beautiful church wedding with the bridesmaids in their lovely flowerlike dresses, and Toby as best man. But she mustn't think of that now. She mustn't!

The phone shrilled on the early morning silence. Glenna sprang to answer it. Maybe it was Floyd. Maybe he hadn't eloped with Melva Voile, after all.

It was only Toby.

"Glenna, can you come and get me?" he asked. "I'm stranded at a bar out here in the country. Somebody must have lifted my wallet, and I haven't a cent for cab fare. I had to borrow a nickel from the bartender to call you."

"What happened to your car?" she asked.

"I didn't bring it. I came out to hang one on, and I thought it best not to try and drive." He hesitated. "You know that Floyd and Melva eloped this afternoon?"

"Yes." Her voice was steady.

This was hard on Toby too. He had been engaged to Melva for three years—long before she skyrocketed to stardom.

"I came out here to get blind drunk, so I wouldn't be able to think or feel anything for the next two weeks."

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"And are you?"

"No." He sounded mad about it. "My blood is boiling so furiously that the alcohol doesn't have any effect on me. I've never been so cold sober in my whole life!"

She laughed softly, and was shocked that she could laugh. "I'll be there as soon as I can get dressed."

She put on the beautiful new grey suit. The suit she was to have worn on her wedding trip. Glenna was a tall, slim girl who could wear tailored suits with smooth perfection. Her figure was gracefully curved, her legs long and slender. Her brown silken hair had a golden depth that made it gleam brightly. She had wide-apart dark pansy blue eyes with short thick black lashes. Her face was small featured, and Toby had often told her she still looked like a little girl.

She had known Toby all her life, and never once had she felt any romantic interest in him. Toby just wasn't the romantic type. He was the most ordinary, uninteresting man she had ever known.

AS CHILDREN they had lived next door to each other, and it was Toby who had mended her broken dolls for her. When her puppy had been killed and she had been heartbroken for days afterward, Toby had given her his own pet dog, though it must have hurt him deeply to part with it. Often in the evenings they had sat at the dining room table and put together model airplanes while their parents played cards in the next room.

"Gee, you're almost as nice as a boy," Toby had told her once. For days afterward she had been swelled with pride and pleasure. It was the nicest compliment a boy could give a girl of eight.

Her father had died that year, and when Glenna was fifteen her mother had married a wealthy investment broker. They had moved to a beautiful suburban home, and Glenna had been swept up in the whirl of her exciting new life of wealth. It had been at one of her step-father's lavish parties that she had first met Floyd Godwin.

She saw little of Toby those years. He was three years her senior and was away at college most of the time, learning advertising. Then war broke out, and Toby broke his mother's heart by rushing down to volunteer. From overseas he had written Glenna a couple of times, and all he could write about was the thrill of flying. From now on, he had written, his life was going to be spent with airplanes.

When he had returned, after the war was over, he and an air-force buddy had raised every cent they could and had borrowed heavily from Glenna's stepfather to buy a little airport on the outskirts of town. They had given flying lessons to GI students. Glenna had driven out to the air field a couple of times, and never had she met two such happy, enthusiastic men. Toby and his partner ate, slept and talked flying. The school was their life and blood.

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Then had come the shock.

Her stepfather had refused to renew the mortgage and had seized the flying school. White and trembling, Glenna had faced him in the library one evening.

"You can't do this to Toby," she had cried, shaken with fury. "Don't you understand? He's my friend!"

Her stepfather had patted her shoulder soothingly. "There's nothing to get so upset about, my dear. This sort of thing happens every day in my business. It's the way I make my money. If I let friendships influence me, I'd never be able to buy you and your mother pretty clothes and fast cars."

"But Toby was making a go of it! In a few years he would have been able to pay back every cent he borrowed from you."

"I know. That's why I had to forclose now. The property is worth far more than the interest I would have made on the loan."

Glenna had stared at him in horror. How could any man be so cruel as to hurt Toby? Toby, who was one of the finest people she had ever known.

SOON AFTER she had left her stepfather's home, never to return. He had paid her tuition at a secretarial school, and with a fierce, burning pride she had later repaid him every cent. He was hurt at her attitude, she knew, and he had deposited several thousand dollars to her meager bank account. But it could rot before she'd touch one penny of it.

Toby had found a job writing imaginative publicity for Godwin Studios, and in no time at all he had been promoted to head of the department.

It was he who had hired Glenna.

And it was Toby who had made a star of Melva Voile, the girl he was engaged to. She had been a pale, mousy girl until Toby had taken her in hand. He had had her dye her hair a flaming red and had told her to wear it long and uncurled, so that it almost hid one eye as it hung over her cheek. He had taught her to give veiled, flirtatious glances through her eyelashes, and he had written reams of publicity about her. She had been a sensation in her first good part.

And now she had eloped with Floyd.

When Glenna drove up to the dingy night club, Toby was waiting for her at the curb.

"I don't want to go home again," she said, leaning her head wearily on the steering wheel. "It's so deathly quiet there, and all those wedding presents keep leering at me."

"I'll take you out, if you'll lend me some money," he answered.

"I have money." She had drawn out her savings just that morning.

"Let's find a place with a little more refinement."

"I don't want refinement," she retorted, with a little toss of her head. "I want noise. Lots and lots of noise."

"This is the place, then," Toby said, opening the car door for her.

The place was jumping with jive. They found a table far back in a corner. The waiter flicked at the soiled table cloth with his towel, and when he brought their drinks he spilled them clumsily.

Toby lifted his glass. "Here's to drowning ourselves," he said.

She drank to that.

They sat in moody silence, not touching their drinks after the first sip. With a dejected sigh Toby broke the silence.

"I build up the girl I love. I make her a star, and she walks out on me for a millionaire. Well, I've learned my lesson. No more falling in love for me. From now on I'm going to be as hard as nails. When I marry, it's going to be for money. Money makes the world go round and gets you the things you want."

Glenna lifted her glass. "No more falling in love for either of us."

They drank to that. For a long time they just sat and stared at nothing, twisting the slender-stemmed glasses round and round in their fingers.

"I quit my job today," he announced finally.

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She lifted her eyes to his white face. "What will you do now?"

"I don't know. Go bumming around the country until my money runs out, I guess. Then I'll try and get a job as pilot with some airline."

"You should have gotten a job like that a long time ago."

"I COULDN'T. After we lost the school I was dead inside. It wouldn't have been the same flying for someone else." He sighed heavily. "I have a chance to buy into a little tramp airline that hauls freight. It's just killing me to have to turn down an opportunity like that. Owning my own plane, working for myself. It would be heaven. But where could I ever get that kind of money?"

"How much do you need? I'll lend you the money, Toby. That money I have in the bank is really yours, anyway."

He patted her hand. "Thanks, kitten, but I couldn't borrow from you. There's always the chance that I couldn't pay it back. No, I couldn't take money from you."

"You could if I was your wife." She stared at him, stunned. The words had just spoken themselves.

He lifted his steady blue eyes to hers. "What do you mean?"

Suddenly she was trembling with eagerness. She had found a way out for both of them.

She leaned toward him. "Toby, I'll buy you a partnership in that airline if you'll marry me! You want money. I want to save my pride. If I were to marry tomorrow, the newspapers wouldn't have any story, would they? I wouldn't have to face all that bitter humiliation."

"Yes," he said, his face softening, "I guess those reporters will put you through the mill. It's harder for a girl to take a thing like that."

"We could drive to Nevada and be married tomorrow," she cried eagerly. "It could be a marriage in name only and after a couple of months we could get a quickie divorce. No one ever need know of our secret bargain."

His eyes darkened thoughtfully. "You could quit your job, and I could take care of you until I was earning enough to pay back what I borrowed. It might not be so bad at that. A marriage without love might work out. In the olden days people didn't marry for love. The parents did the match-making, and those marriages worked out. It's when you're in love that you get hurt."

They talked it over a while longer, and the more they thought about it, the better it sounded. Toby wanted money, and Glenna wanted security. She knew that Toby would never do anything to hurt her. And either one could have a divorce whenever they wanted it.

She drove Toby home, then went to her apartment to pack an overnight bag. It was daylight when she went back to pick him up.

"Still game?" he asked, grinning.

"More now than ever," she breathed. She had been so afraid he would back out.

THEY WERE married late that afternoon in a trite little ceremony that was stripped of all sentiment. Toby slipped a plain gold band on her finger, gave her a light impersonal kiss, and they were married, for better or for worse.

Toby registered for them at a swank, modernistic hotel just out of Reno, and they went upstairs to their separate rooms.

"We'd better get a few hours sleep, then we can meet for dinner," Glenna said matter-of-factly. That was the nice thing about this marriage, it was all so matter-of-fact. No emotion. No anguish.

At the door of her room Toby stopped her. "I think I should be the first to tell you," he said quietly. "It might not hurt you so much, that way. Floyd and Melva are staying here, too. They aren't married."

She stared at him blankly, too weary to feel anything. "How do you know?"

"I saw their names on the register and asked the desk clerk about them. They have separate rooms, and they didn't get married, after all."

There was nothing more to say.

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She went into her room and threw herself across the bed. What irony. She and Toby had rushed into marriage, and now they discovered that Melva and Floyd hadn't married. Poor Toby. What regrets he must be having! But she was too tired to think about it. In less than a minute she was fast asleep, her hand under her cheek like a sleeping child.

Three hours later when she went downstairs she looked as refreshing as a breath of spring. She was wearing the smart grey suit and a corsage of dewy gardenias. She hesitated in the doorway of the brightly lighted dining room and glanced around for Toby. But he hadn't come down yet. Then she saw someone waving to her and was amazed to see that it was Jane, who shared the apartment with her. She went over and sat down at Jane's table, trying not to notice her friend's red eyelids and red nose.

"Jane, what are you doing here? I've always heard that the surest way to meet your old friends is to go to another city, and now I believe it."

Jane sniffed and gave her a watery smile. "I came here to have a gay fling, but it was a mistake. Everybody else is having such a good time, and I—I—" she broke off and fumbled for her handkerchief.

"I suppose you know by now that Floyd jilted me," Glenna said, and realized immediately that it was cruel of her to get Jane's hopes up again.

"Yes, I read it in the paper." Jane blew her nose vigorously. "You married Toby instead. I know all about it. I was sitting in the lounge when you came in together, and when you went upstairs I went over and looked at the register. I don't understand it, at all." She dabbed away a fresh fall of tears.

SHE CAN'T understand how I could marry anyone like Toby after having known Floyd, Glenna thought. I've got to put her straight about Floyd. She can't go on like this, eating her heart out over him.

"Look, Jane," she said gently. "Floyd is a heel. You must understand that. A man with any decency at all wouldn't jilt a girl on the eve of her wedding and run off with another girl."

"I'm glad you see it that way," Jane said calmly. "I always did think you were too good for him. I'd have tried to talk you out of marrying him, but I knew you'd only hate me for it."

Glenna stared in bewilderment.

Just then Jane glanced toward the door. She stiffened and her homely little face went pale. "There's my boss," she cried piteously. She seemed to think that when a man was your boss, he was in a class all by himself. When she said boss she somehow made it sound as if it was the title of a king. "Oh, he mustn't see me with my eyes all red. I must look a sight."

She slipped out of her chair and hurried away through the maize of tables.

Glenna clenched her hands and braced herself to meet Floyd. She turned her head slowly and looked toward the doorway. Her eyes widened in shock.

It was Toby who stood there, his eyes scanning the tables for her.

Her head swam dizzily. Was it Toby whom Jane was in love with? Oh, how blind she had been not to have realized it before this. Toby was head of the department, and he was really their boss, not Floyd. Jane had been crying because *Toby* was married.

Glenna stared at him, and she knew that she was really seeing him for the first time. How manly and handsome he was! His blond hair was thick and soft, with just a hint of a wave in front. His lean face was deeply tanned. He was thin and tall, and his shoulders were broad without padding.

His blue eyes met hers from across the room, and she felt a sudden excitement. He started toward her, his eyes holding hers with a smile. Two girls sitting alone at a table turned to look around at him, but he didn't even glance their way.

Glenna felt a sudden glow of pride that this man was her husband. Her

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hands were icy, and her heart was pounding.

He sat down across from her. "You're the most beautiful bride I've ever seen," he said, putting his hand on hers. "How do you always manage to look so radiantly lovely, Mrs. Carter?"

It was the first time she had been addressed by her married name, and it sent a little thrill trickling through her. She kept her hand very still under his. She was almost afraid to breathe for fear he would take his hand away.

HIS EYES held hers teasingly, and suddenly she knew that she was in love with Toby. What she had felt for Floyd had just been a schoolgirl crush. Now she knew that she hadn't been really hurt at losing him. It had been her pride that had suffered, and all along she had been thinking only of her humiliation.

"By the way," Toby added, "mom told me to kiss the bride for her. She and dad always hoped we would marry some day. Do you want that kiss now?"

She felt herself blushing and dropped her eyelashes. "No, not now. When we're alone."

"Why, Mrs. Carter, you shock me!" he mocked. "By the way, dad lent me some money. Let's go out on the town in a real celebration."

The waitress came up to them to take their orders. Toby gave Glenna's hand a little squeeze as he pulled his away. She was too happy to even think of eating.

That evening with Toby was the most wonderful she had ever known. They went to a plush gambling casino and won a hundred dollars at roulette. Giddy with their success as gamblers, they went to a night club where the lights were low and the music sweet. The head waiter brought them a bottle of champagne.

"Compliments of the house," he said. "You are newlyweds, yes?"

"Why, how did you know?" Glenna gasped.

He winked at her. "We can always pick out the honeymooners, madam."

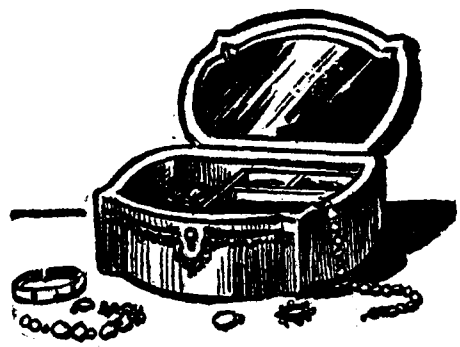
When he had gone away, Toby pretended to be jealous. "That old wolf isn't fooling me," he said. "He's just trying to make a hit with my wife and I don't like it."

"Don't you, dear?" she asked. He didn't seem to resent the endearment at all. He smiled.

It had been a long time since she had danced with Toby, and she was surprised at how effortlessly their steps blended together. His hand burned through the fabric of her suit, and she thought how strong and gentle his arm felt at her waist. She laid her cheek against his.

"I'm glad you're tall," he whispered. "I never did like to dance with short girls."

Her heart soared. Did he really care something about her after all? Or was Toby the sort of man who would just naturally be attentive and kind to his wife?



IT WAS almost daylight when they got back to the hotel. Toby unlocked the door of her room, then went on down the hall to his own room. She stood looking after his broad back, a deep feeling of loss within her because he hadn't kissed her goodnight.

She had changed into her pajamas before she discovered that she had brought a tooth brush, but no tooth paste. Slipping into her robe, she padded down the hall to borrow his. She knocked on the door twice, and when there was no answer, she opened the door and went in. A desk lamp was on, but Toby wasn't there. She opened his suitcase and found the tooth paste.

"Well," he said from the doorway,

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"I step out a moment to send my folks a telegram from us, and I find a prowler in my room when I get back. Can't you even wait for the honeymoon to be over before you start going through my pockets?"

"But, Toby, I just came to borrow your tooth paste."

"No excuses. I can see where I'm going to have to discipline you," he said with mock severity. And taking her by the ear, he marched her back down the hall.

She stood in the doorway of her room and looked up at him with childlike innocence. "Toby, aren't you forgetting to kiss me for your mother?"

For a long moment he stood looking at her through slightly narrowed eyes. She waited, her heart suspended in midair.

"She won't know the difference if I put it off for another day," he said, and turning abruptly on his heel, walked away.

She resisted the impulse to slam the door. She leaned against it, burning with fury. Wasn't he ever going to kiss her?

The next morning she went down to breakfast feeling as if it was her sixteenth birthday. She stopped short in the doorway of the dining room and drew a sharp, jagged breath. Toby was sitting across the table from Melva. At the glow in his eyes Glenna suddenly felt sixty. Toby had never looked at her that way.

Everyone in the dining room was staring at Melva in open admiration. The star had never been more beautiful. She was wearing a grey silk dress that made her smoky grey eyes seem enormous in her pale face. Her flaming red hair glistened about her shoulders. She was smiling provocatively at Toby and looking up at him through her long eyelashes.

GLENNA clenched her hands into tiny fists, and turned to creep silently away. But Toby had seen her. He got to his feet and held out one hand to her, as if she were a shy child he wanted to draw to him. She went toward him on leaden feet, unable to meet his eyes. His hand closed around hers where it hung on her side and held it tightly for a moment. She would have taken a chair across the table from him, but he pulled out the one right next to his. She dropped into it weakly.

"Melva, I believe you've met my wife," he said quietly.

Glenna looked up at him gratefully, and found him smiling at her. He was treating her as if she were his wife, not just someone he had run off with in a moment of madness. He might not love her, but Glenna knew he would always be considerate of her and treat her as if she was someone special. And suddenly everything was all right. She lifted her head proudly and smiled across at Melva.

"Yes, I've met her," Melva said, looking from one to the other of them. "But I don't understand this sudden marriage of yours. Toby, you've always been so steady and dependable. I feel as if you've let me down somehow. A girl doesn't like to be forgotten so quickly."

Toby said nothing, and a moment later Floyd sat down at their table.

"They're married," Melva told him.

Floyd looked up in surprise. "I hope you knew what you were doing, Glenna," he said. "You deserve the best."

"I've got the best," she answered with quiet sincerity.

He glanced over at Melva. "I suppose you've been telling them what a beast I am for not marrying you," he said coolly.

"I told Toby that we quarreled because you were rude to me," Melva answered. "I wouldn't marry any man who criticizes my clothes."

"You have no style," Floyd said cuttingly. "Somebody has to tell you

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how to dress, or you'd make a fool of yourself in public."

Melva tossed back her long hair. "That somebody will never be you!"

"Don't worry. You'll wait a long time before I ask you again to marry me."

They glared at each other angrily.

Toby tactfully changed the subject. "What are you people doing for excitement this evening? Maybe the four of us could go out together."

"I meant to tell you I'm giving a party tonight. There'll be a square dance and a hayride afterward," Floyd said.

Melva smiled at Toby as if he were a camera lens. "And of course you are invited, Toby," she murmured.

"My wife and I will be glad to come," he said quietly.

Melva pouted. "You always sound so married. I can't get used to it."

"The men will wear jeans, and the women calico," Floyd put in.

"And I won't need you to pick out my dress for me," Melva told him, still pouting.

"May I invite a friend of mine?" Glenna asked, thinking of Jane.

"Invite anyone you wish," Floyd told her. "The more, the merrier."

WHEN THEY left the dining room, Glenna went straight to the desk to ask for Jane's room number. The clerk handed her a note from Jane. She had already checked out and was going home to the apartment to pack her things and would be gone when Glenna returned. She was going back to Kansas.

I'm glad, Glenna thought. Now she'll probably marry that nice boy back home.

About an hour later Glenna glanced out of her window and saw Toby and Melva walking together in the garden. While she watched, Melva looped her arm through Toby's. They were both laughing as if they were having a wonderful time together. Glenna turned away from the window, her heart bleeding.

How did you go about making your husband fall in love with you?

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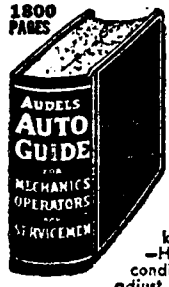

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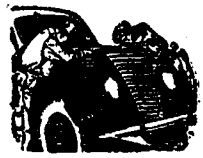

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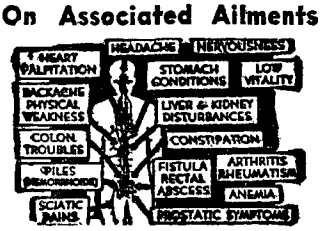

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dress for the party. She came down into the lobby, a thoughtful little frown between her eyes. Jealousy, she decided. If only she could make Toby think someone else was in love with her. Floyd.

She passed the little glassed-in flower stand just off the lobby and stopped short, looking in at the corsages. Without a moment's hesitation she went in and ordered an orchid to be delivered to herself every morning.

"I don't want any card with it," she said. Maybe it would be best to keep Toby guessing about the mysterious sender of those orchids. He might even worry a little about it. "And just charge them to my hotel bill," she told the florist. She would pay for them herself before she left the hotel.

She returned from her shopping, and a few minutes later the first orchid was delivered to her. She flew down the hall, orchid in hand, and burst into Toby's room.

"Darling, how sweet of you to send me an orchid," she purred.

She threw her arms about his neck and kissed him firmly on the lips. When he had recovered from the first moment of surprise, his arms went about her and he held her close. His lips held hers in a long, long kiss while time stood still. Then he kissed her again, and the second kiss was even more wonderful than the first.

"Why, Mrs. Carter, you surprise me," he whispered. "I always thought of you as just a little girl, and here you are all grown up." His arms dropped to his side, and he stepped away from her. "But I didn't send you the orchid."

"You didn't!" she gasped, her eyes round and innocent. "But who did?"

"Wasn't there a card with it?"

"No." She dropped her thick black lashes shyly. "Naturally, I thought it was from you."

"Well, it wasn't." He looked down at the orchid in her hand. "I'm not sure I like the idea of my wife receiving orchids from another man."

"I was going to wear it to the party tonight," she said. "But if you don't want me to, I won't."

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"By all means, wear it," he said stiffly.

THEY WENT down to the ballroom arm in arm. Toby looked very tall and slim in his jeans and high-heeled boots, a red kerchief knotted about his brown throat. Glenna looked sweetly demure in her long rose-colored calico dress with its tight waist and rows of ruffles about the hem. Her face looked small and childish beneath the matching sun bonnet.

Floyd came over to greet them. She hoped he would mention the orchid pinned at her shoulder, but of course he didn't, so she called his attention to it.

"Isn't my orchid beautiful?" she murmured. "And I don't even know who sent it."

"But I'm sure you needed only one guess," Floyd said. Naturally, he thought Toby had sent it.

From the corner of her eye she glanced at Toby. He was looking at Floyd with steady blue eyes that said, "She knows darn well who sent it. You did."

She smiled happily to herself. It was working out the way she had hoped it would. Then her eyes widened in amazement as Melva joined them, dressed as a dancehall girl. She was wearing a red silk dress with a glittering gold trim. Her cheeks and lips were heavily rouged, and there was a large black mole painted on her chin. She looked pathetically cheap and out of place amid all the simple calico dresses.

How could she have been so foolish as to wear a red dress that clashes with her red hair? Glenna wondered.

The caller was asking the men and women to line up opposite each other for the first dance. Toby took Glenna's arm and led her out on the floor.

But after that first dance together she maneuvered to stay away from him. She eagerly accepted the invitation of the first man who asked her to dance, always managing to be walking out on the floor with her

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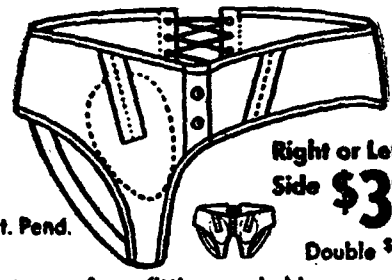

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new partner before Toby could reach her side.

She didn't have to pretend she was enjoying herself. Laughing gaily, she whirled and clapped her hands and bowed, her ruffled skirts flaring outward around her slim ankles. Her cheeks were flushed and her blue eyes sparkled. The sun bonnet had long since slipped off her brown hair and hung down her back.

The fiddles sang, and the caller beat time with his foot.

"Swing the pretty little thing to the right. Swing the pretty little thing to the left. Now promenade. Oh, promenade."

Once she looked for Toby and found his eyes on her. His partner was Melva, and she looked hot and flushed. Her heavy makeup was caked.

Toward the end of the evening when they were all changing partners, she found herself facing Toby for a moment.

"You're the most popular girl here tonight," he said. "I haven't been able to get within a mile of you all evening."

She only laughed and whirled away in the arms of the next man. At the end of that dance she saw Toby making his way toward her, and tried to duck from sight. But his hand closed firmly around her wrist and he held on tightly until the music began again. It was the last dance of the evening.

THEY ALL went out to the bar and had a cocktail, then they went outside to the big wagon padded with hay. Toby kept a firm hold on her hand until she was seated in the hay beside him.

"I'm not going to let you get away from me again," he said.

She smiled at him happily. She didn't want to get away from him—ever.

The musicians went along with them and fiddled while they all sang cowboy songs and ballads. There was a full moon shining down on the hills and silvery sagebrush. Glenna drew a deep breath and sighed happily.

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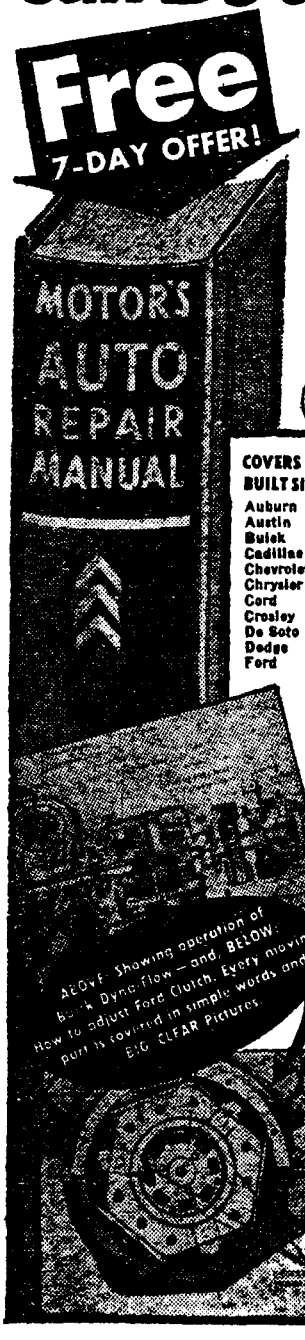

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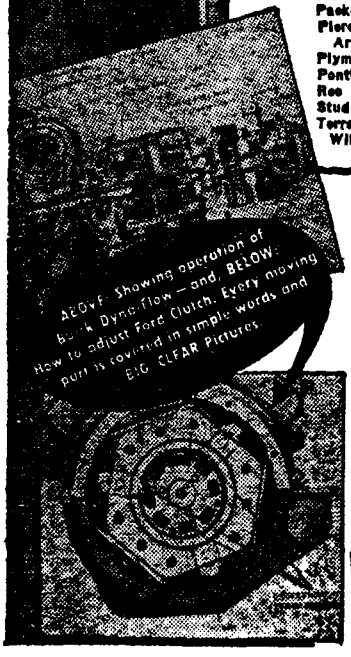
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Toby glanced down at her. "You should have brought a wrap," he said. "Are you chilly?"

She shook her head. "No," she answered, and immediately could have bitten her tongue off. Why hadn't she said yes, then he would put his arm around her. She sighed. Live and learn.

Going home she shivered a little. "It is chilly," she whispered.

Toby put his arm around her and drew her to him. She laid her head on his shoulder and cuddled up to him. It was the nicest shoulder in the whole world, she thought sleepily.

Back at the hotel Toby shook her gently. "Time to wake up," he said.

She looked at him round-eyed. "Was I asleep?"

"Sleeping like a baby," he answered, smiling.

The next day she and Toby had plans to rent horses and explore one of the old mining ghost towns up in the hills. Before breakfast she hurried out to the stable and handed one of the men a twenty dollar bill.

"My husband and I are going up into the hills to the old ghost town," she told him. "I want you to go ahead and wait for us there. Don't let my husband see you, but when you get a chance, take our horses and bring them back here. We're going to spend the night at the hotel. I understand it's open to tourists."

"Yes, ma'm," he said, grinning like a monkey at the bill in his hand.

She went back into the hotel feeling well pleased with herself. Toby was waiting for her at their table.

"The florist just brought that for you," he said, motioning to an orchid in a plastic box.

The way he said "that" made her look at him searchingly. Did she only imagine it, or was his jaw really set in a hard, tight line? Her spirits soared. She lifted the orchid out of the box.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she breathed. "But there isn't any card!"

He didn't answer.

"I won't wear it," she said.

He said nothing.

Before they had finished breakfast

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WRONG GAL ON THE HONEYMOON

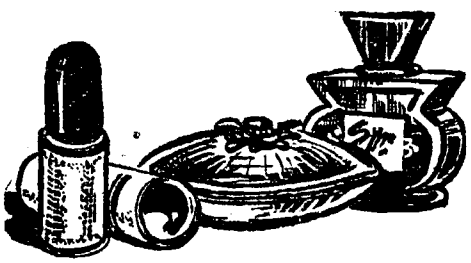
Melva and Floyd joined them.

"We're going up to the old ghost town to do a bit of exploring," Toby told them. "Why don't you two come along?"

Glenna's heart sank. She had so wanted to be alone with Toby.

"Sure," Floyd answered. "Sounds like fun."

"Count me out," Melva said. "I have a headache."



WHEN THEY stepped out into the lobby, Toby took Glenna aside.

"On second thought, I don't think I'll go either," he said. "You and Floyd go."

She looked at him with haunted eyes. "You want me to go alone with him?" she asked tremulously.

His eyes met hers steadily. "Yes, alone with him," he answered quietly.

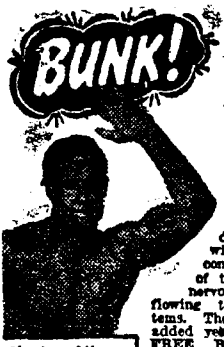
She turned away wearily. What had made him change his mind so suddenly? Was it because he wanted a chance to be alone with Melva all day?

The trip on horseback was long and dusty and hot. Glenna was miserable. A thousand times she wished she had refused to go without Toby. She kept thinking about him. She was tortured by the memory of seeing him walking arm and arm with Melva in the garden. They had looked so happy together.

It was hard to imagine that these few shabby buildings had once been a living, pulsating city. They left their horses at a hitching rack in front of a saloon and joined the handful of tourists who were walking along the plank sidewalk.

They went to the opera house where beautiful girls had once danced behind footlights made up of

[*Turn To Page* 126]



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a hundred smoking candles, but now the once gaudy building was musty and falling apart. Floyd spent a long time in the shops, examining the antiques, and left an order for several things to be sent to the studio.

In a shabby tarnished restaurant where everything was gold from ceiling to floor, they had lunch. A tired old man with a white canvas apron tied around his waist took their order and made them wait while he prepared it. He went into a long story about the place, telling them that this was where the millionaire mine owners used to come for their dinners, and that the gold plates and silverware used to be kept in the safe.

Glenna was bored by it all. What were Toby and Melva talking about now? Was Toby bitterly regretting his hasty marriage? When Glenna returned to the hotel would she find him waiting to tell her he wanted a divorce? She toyed with her food, unable to eat for the hard lump in her throat. She wanted to put her head down on the table and cry.

When they came out of the restaurant Floyd gave a low exclamation.

"Our horses got loose and wandered away!" he cried.

A cold shudder froze along her spine. How could she have been so stupid as to forget? She had been so worried about Toby and Melva that she had been unable to think of anything else.

"Toby will rent a car and come for us," she said confidently.

THEY WENT into a saloon with a high, old-fashioned bar and sawdust on the floor. She kept telling herself over and over, "Toby will come. Toby will come." She kept watching the doorway for him until her eyes ached.

But he didn't come, and he didn't send anyone else for them. She was hurt and bewildered.

"I guess we'd better go to the hotel and get rooms," Floyd said at last.

She followed him numbly across the street.

"Only got one room vacant," the man at the desk told them. "We only

[*Turn To Page* 128]

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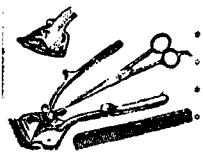

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got five rooms fixed up for guests, and four of them are taken."

Floyd cocked a questioning eyebrow at her.

"No," she said, and strode out.

They went back to the saloon.

"You're wearing a wedding ring—" Floyd began.

She glared at him. "No!"

"Look, I'll sleep on the floor."

"No." Her chin began to quiver, and she looked away, toward the door. "Toby will be here any minute now." But she knew it wasn't true. For the first time in her life he had let her down.

Floyd didn't bring up the subject again, and they sat there for long, dreary hours. At last the bartender approached them.

"We're closing up now, folks," he said.

They went out into the street, and the raw, mountain air cut through her thin clothing. She shivered and folded her arms about her slim waist. Everything else was closed for the night. There wasn't a soul on the street.

"What do we do now?" Floyd asked. "Walk up and down the street all night and freeze like a couple of darn fools?"

There was nothing to do but take the room at the hotel. Floyd rang the bell on the desk, and the clerk came out in his bathrobe. He gave them the key peevishly.

They sat down in rockers on opposite sides of the ugly, old-fashioned room. Floyd took out a pack of cigarettes and held it toward her. She shook her head.

"I can't understand why Toby didn't come for me," she said wearily. "I just can't understand it."

"You really love that guy, don't you?"

"I'll just die if he leaves me," she whispered, and brushed the tears from her eyelashes.

Floyd got up and started toward her.

"Stay where you are! Don't you dare step over that line!" She pointed at an imaginary line in the middle of the floor.

"I only wanted to get an ash tray,"

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he said.

"I'll get you one."

SHE GOT up and slid one across the floor to him. He laughed and went back to his rocker.

"I'm going to marry Melva when I get back," he said, grinning crookedly. "I guess I've made her wait long enough."

"You've waited too long!" she flung at him.

"What do you mean by that?"

But she couldn't answer. The tears were rolling down her cheeks. She put her head down on her arm and sobbed unashamedly.

"I can't see what made her wear that red dress last night," Floyd said. "She looked hideous. After we're married, I'm going to pick out everything she wears."

After awhile Glenna stopped sobbing. Floyd was asleep. His mouth had fallen open, and he was snoring lustily. He snored so loudly she couldn't sleep. She began to cry all over again.

He called to her from across the room, and she woke up, aching in every bone.

"I've just been out in the street," he said, "and I've found us a ride back to town. The mail carrier is going in with the mail, and if we hurry we can ride with him."

She hurried.

Back at the hotel, she went straight to Toby's room and flung the door open. She stood there, white-faced. He was snapping his bag shut.

"Were you leaving without me?" she gasped.

"Yes, my pet," he said dryly. "You can stay here and get your quickie divorce."

Everything collapsed inside of her. It was just as she had feared. He wanted a divorce so he could marry Melva. Tears swam in her eyes.

"Why—why didn't you come and get us?" she whispered brokenly.

"Come and get you!" he exploded. "After the man at the stable told me how you paid him to take the horses away so you could stay there with Floyd?"

"Toby, it wasn't— I didn't—" She couldn't go on for the ragged pain in her throat.

"I'm the prize fool of the century!" he stormed. "I fell in love with my wife, and for a while I thought she was falling in love with me. But I had to be sure, so I sent you off alone with Floyd. I thought it might bring you to your senses and help you get yourself straightened out. Well, you straightened things out fine."

There was a timid knock at the door. "Flowers for Mrs. Carter," a voice said.

Toby flung the orchid on the bed. "From loverboy!" he cried.

Through a blur of tears she saw him pick up his suitcase and start toward the door.

"Toby!" she screamed.

He answered with a slam of the door.

THERE WAS a knock at the door, and she came alive with hope. But it was only the maid.

"Shall I do up the room now?" she asked.

"No. Go away!"

She dropped down on the edge of the bed and laid her forehead against the footboard. The tears fell, and she knew she could never stop sobbing. After a while the door opened again. That darn maid!

"Go away!" she cried thickly. "You can do up the room later."

Toby was standing there, a strangely gentle expression on his face. She got to her feet shakily.

"Toby, what—"

"I just met Floyd and Melva in the lobby, on their way to the justice of the peace. He told me about that imaginary line of yours."

She couldn't speak.

"And you know what?" he said softly. "The strangest thing happened when I went to pay my hotel bill. They gave me a bill from the florist. It seems my wife has been sending herself orchids. Why?"

"I wanted to make you jealous. I wanted you to think that Floyd—"

Toby cut off her words with a fierce, burning kiss.

THE END

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Test the Figure-Adjuster at home for ten days FREE at our expense! It's sent on approval! *It must do all we claim for it or return it after ten days* and we'll send your money right back. We take all the risk . . . that's because we know that even though you may have tried many others you haven't tried the BEST until you have tried a FIGURE-ADJUSTER! MAIL COUPON NOW!

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☐ I will pay postman $4.98 plus postage.
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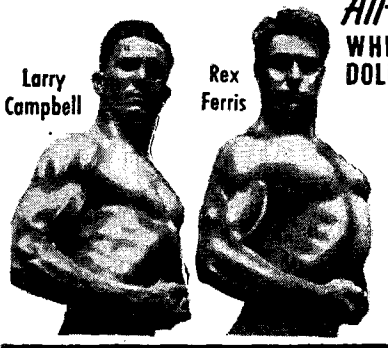

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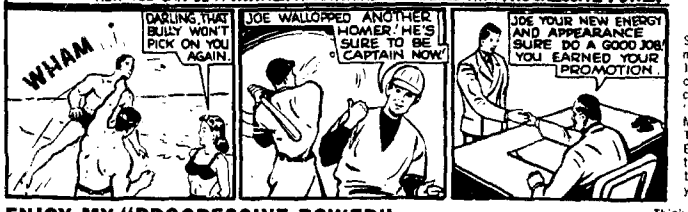
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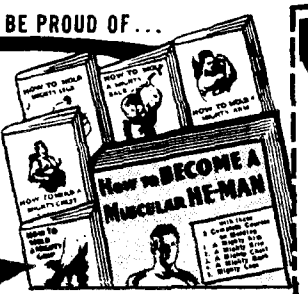

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